ASSASSIN'S CREED III: "THE TECH THAT WILL SEE IN THE NEXT GEN"



Wii U | PS3 | Xbox 360 | Wii | PC | iPad | PS Vita | 3DS | PSP | iPhone | DS | Arcade | Retro

GOING VIRAL

■ 1 MILLION DOWNLOADS ■ 2 BILLION ZOMBIES KILLED ■ 17 MILLION HOURS PLAYED

HOW ONE MAN'S MOD BROKE OUT AND CHANGED GAMING FOREVER



PLUS

"THE MARKET IS SATURATED WITH CALL OF DUTY"
Yosuke Hayashi talks on COD, Metroid, and the cutest girls in videogames

FAR CRY 3
How Ubisoft's upcoming epic is the true definition of insanity

GAMING'S BIGGEST RIP-OFF
The industry's finest speak on the true price of free-to-play

■ GRAND THEFT AUTO V ■ METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGEANCE ■ TOMB RAIDER
■ BORDERLANDS 2 ■ XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN ■ STAR WARS 1313 ■ REMEMBER ME



This really is an exciting industry. For all the complaints about the predictability of stagnating genres and boring sequels, surprises actually turn up with relative frequency. The fact that a simple mod could explode in popularity, attract upward of a million players, and then go on to become its own standalone product is something of a rarity. *DayZ* is a short distance, and an XBLA release, away from total global domination. It's a true rags to riches story – and we all like one of those.

The reason? Community. Proof that word of mouth is still one of the strongest forms of promotion. Social networking acts as a megaphone, and sharing creations and telling of your exploits brings those wanting their own stories to the party in droves. Whether it's distributing artistic crops in *FarmVille*, bleating on about a win streak in *SongPop*, or triggering a zombie outbreak-cum-social experiment, you can be sure that like-minded players will want a piece of the action. With games such as *Rock Band Blitz* (reviewed on page 96) using Facebook to goad friends into competition, it's clear that social networking is going to be even more of a key element in gaming's future. To think, some people only use it to show off pictures of their dinner…

Enjoy the issue.

Rick Porter
EDITOR IN CHIEF



OVER

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YOU


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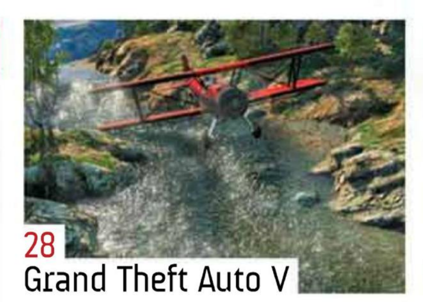
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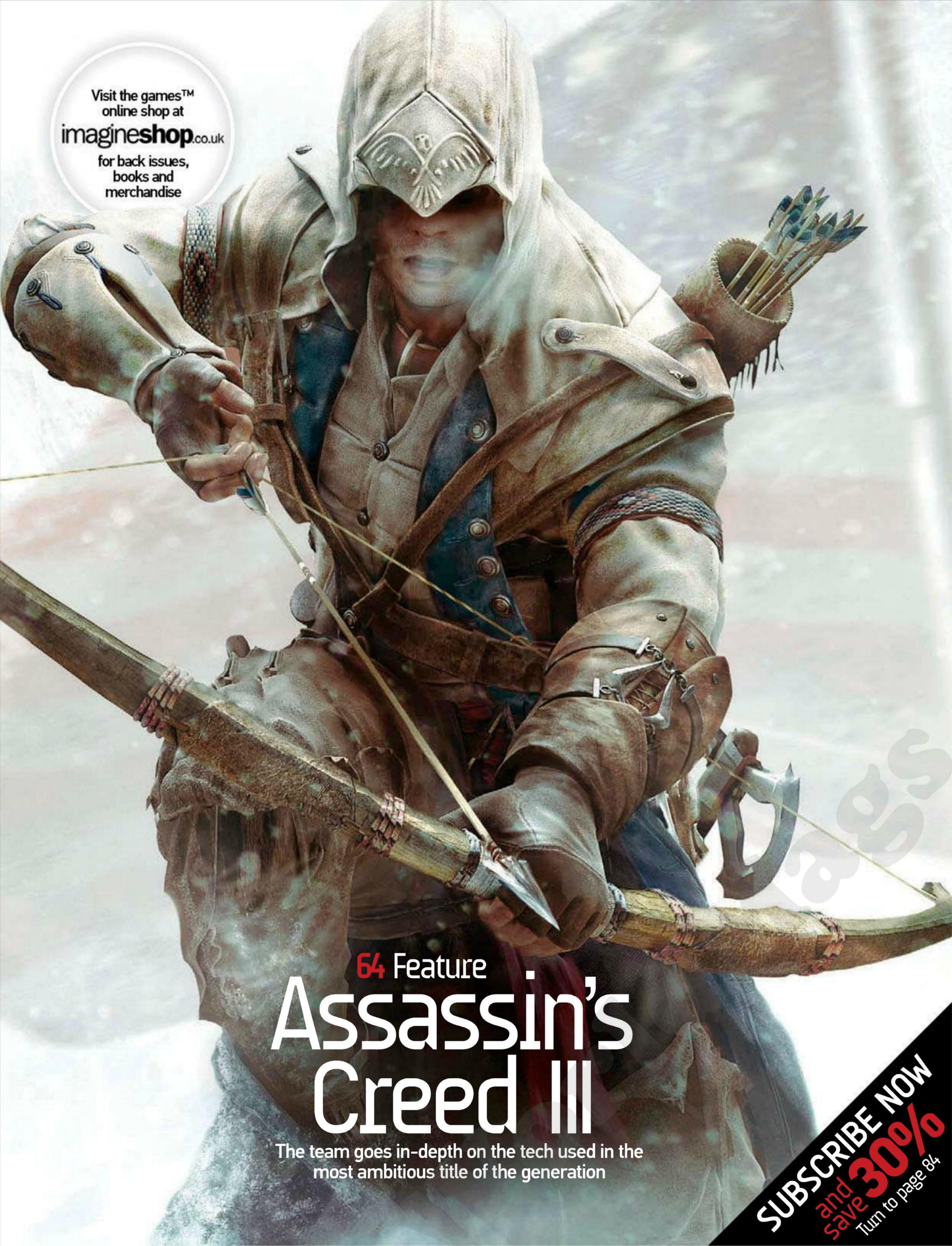

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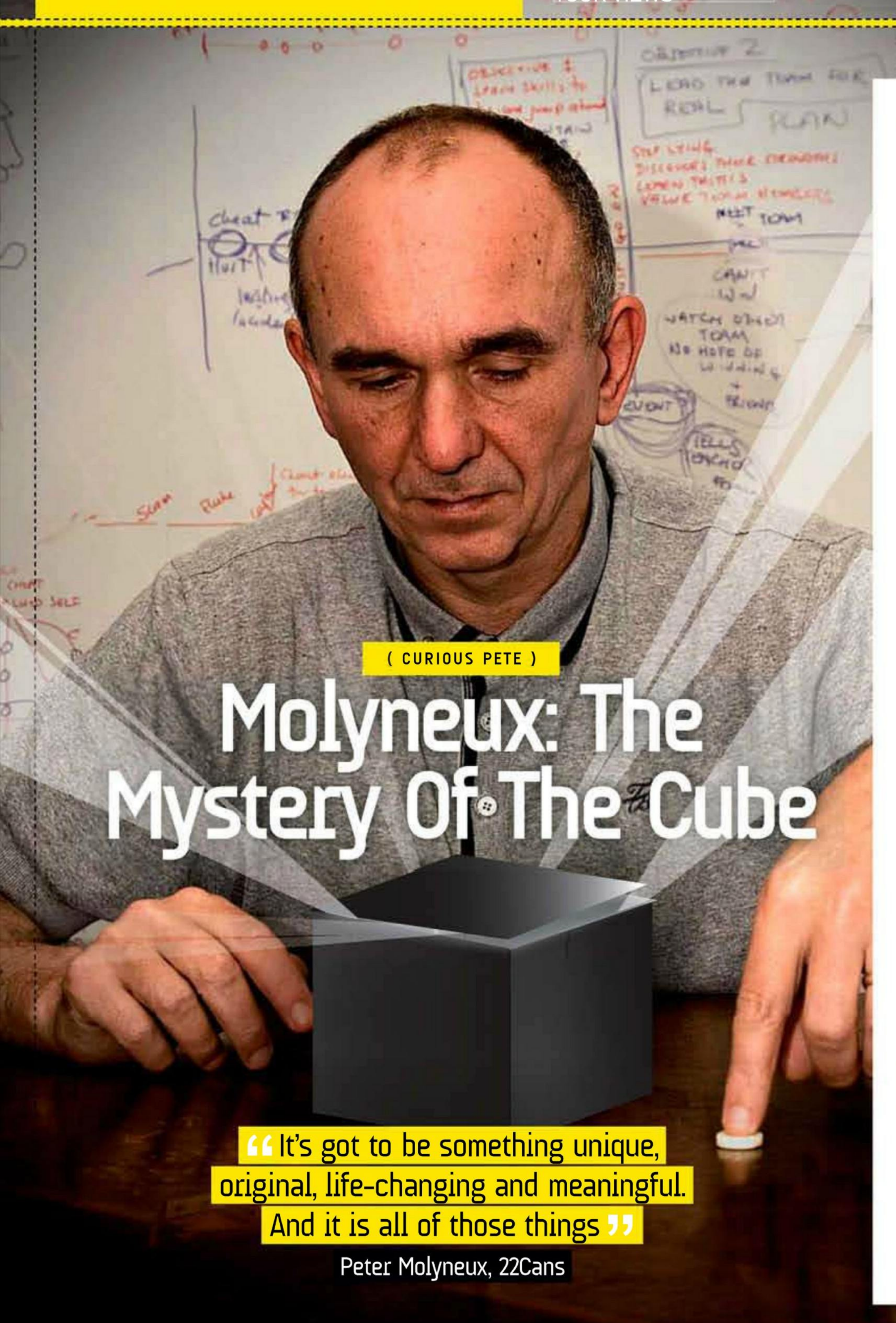
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(CURIOUS PETE)

Molyneux: The Mystery Of The Cube

“It's got to be something unique, original, life-changing and meaningful. And it is all of those things”

Peter Molyneux, 22Cans

→ In Curiosity: What's Inside The Cube, Peter Molyneux's first game since leaving Microsoft, the Fable designer asks players to join together and tap away at 60 billion tiny cubes to get to the centre, revealing a mysterious prize inside.

Part competition, part social experiment, the cube will only crack quickly if players spend real money – up to £50,000, believe it or not – on power-ups that speed up the process. What's inside the cube and how far will people go to find out? Molyneux explains the experiment…

What's inside the cube?

It's interesting to even ask that question because you know I'm not going to tell you the answer. There are 60 billion little tiny sub-cubes, all of which have to be shattered and broken by people tapping. Now they can power up their taps, but essentially that's a lot of work that the world's going to go to, so whatever's in the middle can't be a disappointment. It's got to be something unique, original, life-changing and meaningful. And it is all of those things.

Was it an easy process to decide what would be in the centre?

It was a very easy decision, as I had inspiration from how bad it would be for that thing to be disappointing. I have a nine-year-old son, and I was trying to get him to do something, and I was trying to motivate him to get him to do it. I found the best way to motivate him was I got him this black safety deposit box with a combination code on the

DATA STREAM → THE PRODUCER OF SPIDER-MAN AND IRON MAN IS ADAPTING METAL GEAR SOLID INTO

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Your guide to the essential stories

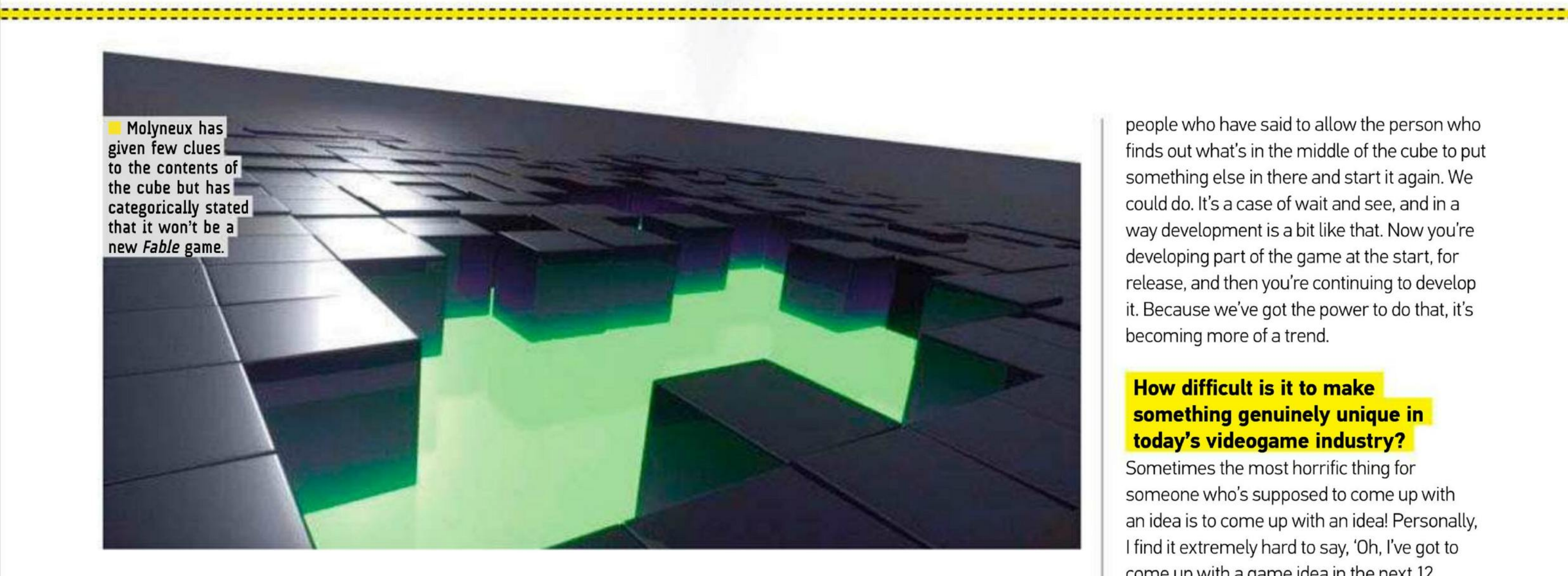
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Molyneux has given few clues to the contents of the cube but has categorically stated that it won't be a new *Fable* game.

front, and I said to him, 'There's something that you would really love inside that box.' Now this was about a year ago, and at that time I hadn't decided what was in his box, and so when he finally opened it up it was some cheesy thing and he was incredibly disappointed. So I know from first-hand experience about that disappointment. To a certain extent, I've always thought about if there was a mystery or if there was a prize, what would be a meaningful prize? I've thought about that for years, so in some ways I've been thinking about this for a very long time.

How long do you estimate it will take for people to get to the centre?

Well, if it was just people tapping once and not being able to power themselves up or chaining them, then it would literally mean that people across the world would have to tap 60 billion times, and that's a heck of a long time. But because you can power yourself up, that means that each one of your taps can take out hundreds, if not thousands, of cubes. It could be anywhere from a few days to a few months.

We were surprised by *Noby Noby Boy*, and how quickly people's collaborative stretching efforts in that game helped them to reach planets like Jupiter…

So that's why, when we were originally considering how big the cube would be, we thought, 'Oh, a billion. That's a hell of a lot,' and then we thought, 'Well no, it's not really a lot. If this is downloaded 100,000 times and everyone taps on it a thousand times a day, well, you'd need a calculator to work it out but that's quite fast. It is an amazing experience, though. You can just leave it on and watch the whole world decaying it, and watch it being dissolved if there are enough people doing it. We've got all sorts of little tricks like, for example, if one of your friends starts tapping on the cube as well, you get a whole load of free coins. You don't have to have done anything; we just know one of your friends from Facebook is on there, so there's a lot of democracy going on.

What's the next step once the centre has been reached? Do you start again? Is the experiment over?

Well, it depends on what the community wants to do. At the moment there are a lot of people who have said to allow the person who finds out what's in the middle of the cube to put something else in there and start it again. We could do. It's a case of wait and see, and in a way development is a bit like that. Now you're developing part of the game at the start, for release, and then you're continuing to develop it. Because we've got the power to do that, it's becoming more of a trend.

How difficult is it to make something genuinely unique in today's videogame industry?

Sometimes the most horrific thing for someone who's supposed to come up with an idea is to come up with an idea! Personally, I find it extremely hard to say, 'Oh, I've got to come up with a game idea in the next 12 hours.' And then other times you could be doing the most bizarre thing and some seed of an idea comes out of you from nowhere. I think with innovation the first thing you do is you take that idea and you ask, 'Why would this be great to do?' For example, with this cube idea the thing is that I love a mystery. The inspiration came from JJ Abrams' TED talk – I'd love to know what's inside the box. That would fuel me to do something very powerful and then to think it through: 'How do I do it?' Shouting, screaming, hitting, punching, tapping or whatever, then you gradually iterate around that idea before you dare say it out loud to anyone, until you've got the rough edges off and it's at least practical. Anyone can say, 'Hey, let's do a game idea about speaking on stage,' but that doesn't mean anything at all. It's the implementation of the idea that's crucial.

A BOX OF DELIGHTS

With *Curiosity* now available, its contents could spill out at any moment. What are they? Molyneux will only say that the prize is something life-changing, so here are our five best guesses…

- A job at 22Cans
- All of the money spent trying to get into the cube
- A luxury speedboat
- A lesson in disappointment
- Milo & Kate





Curiosity is the first of 22 interactive experiments from Molyneux's new studio, leading up to a big, proper game announcement.



A HOLLYWOOD MOVIE. RUMOUR: ZELDA WII U SET FOR 2014 RELEASE WITH BRAND NEW GAME ENGINE



(THE MAKING OF: NEW SUPER MARIO BROS 2)

New Super Mario Team

The *NSMB2* team also worked closely with the *Super Mario 3D Land* team, who suggested the unusual depth-of-field effect that emphasises the foreground over other details.

→ With two Mario games to develop at once, Nintendo was under pressure during the creation of New Super Mario Bros 2, so it turned to its internal school of level designers for help. Mario Cram School alumnus Yusuke Amano explains what the students' fresh thinking brought to the project and how it will continue to evolve

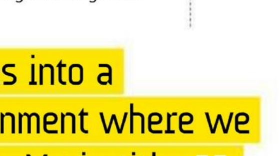
There was a time when Nintendo used to make a new *Mario* game once every few years, but times have changed. With handhelds now able to sustain console-quality releases and the *Mario* series divided into both 2D and 3D incarnations, Nintendo today has to make a lot more *Mario* games than ever before. This year it found itself creating two at once, with *New Super Mario Bros 2* on the 3DS, and forthcoming Wii U launch title *New Super Mario Bros U*.

"We put ourselves into a challenging environment where we had to develop two *Mario* titles at the same time, each title utilising the specific features of 3DS and Wii U," says Nintendo's Yusuke Amano, who is in charge of developing both games. How did Amano overcome this challenge? He went back to school. Specifically, he returned to the Mario Cram School, which he personally attended during his time developing *Star Fox 64 3D*.

Little is known about the mysterious Mario Cram School outside Nintendo, but we do know that it was established by *Super Mario World* director Takashi Tezuka as a way for veteran staff to impart the most important aspect of *Mario* game creation, its level design, to newcomers.

While working on *New Super Mario Bros Wii*, Amano had the chance to play some levels made by the Cram School and was impressed with how many new ideas they added. Though it had never occurred to Nintendo before, it made sense to Amano that the Cram School itself could create a new *Mario* game and, in doing so, solve two problems at once by freeing up resources to create both the 3DS and Wii U games at the same time, and introducing the new ideas that would distinguish the games from one another.

New Super Mario Bros U was developed at the same time as *NSMB2* but has its own distinct style. It's believed that the Cram School graduates also worked on this title, so expect some unusual ideas here too.



Putting a core *Mario* title in the hands of students may seem risky, but Amano maintains that Nintendo has achieved a fine balance of control between the old and new guard. When asked how heavily involved Miyamoto is in the series these days, he answers: "Actually, the whole team has the responsibility to protect the *Mario* brand, and since every one of us truly cares about and likes *Mario*, we seem to always end up with a solution that everybody agrees on. Since Mr Miyamoto knows more about *Mario* than anybody else in this world, he helps us by checking to make sure we aren't going ahead working on something we think is fun without considering how users would feel. This isn't in a very formal way, but instead more like a team member helping out with problems that might arise and suggesting solutions."

THE BIGGEST NEW idea in *New Super Mario Bros 2* is its focus on collecting coins; an all-permeating idea that's taken to extremes with power-ups that turn Mario and all enemies into gold and sees players co-operating globally to amass as many coins as possible. At the time of writing, the global tally stands at over 50 billion and counting.

"When we were planning out the new game designs, we were thinking of what features could possibly help boost users' motivation besides needing to rescue the woman you love from evil hands,"




5 STEPS TO COIN RUSH PERFECTION

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1. This is the most important part of Coin Rush. Hit the very top of the flagpole at the end of a stage and you'll get a x2 multiplier for all of your coins. Do it for all three stages in a row and what would have been x6 overall is boosted to x8.



2. Some coin-giving items like the gold Koopa shell can be exploited using good old-fashioned *Mario* techniques. This one would spin into the abyss below if left alone, but if you hop on it and keep kicking it against the wall, you can rinse it of coins until it turns red again.



3. Gold Mario is one of the most useful power-ups in Coin Rush. Everything he gets is multiplied by two, and his gold fireball racks up loads of bonus points if you kill multiple things at once. And there are hidden ways to do just that. Hit the middle of these pipes, for example, and it nukes all four Piranha Plants at once.



4. Comboing bounces together is another good trick. You'll get a few coins just from jumping on these gold Goombas, but if you combo bounces together so you hit them all without touching the floor, you'll get even more coins.



5. This Block Head power-up was borrowed from *Super Mario 3D Land* but really feels more at home in *New Super Mario Bros 2*. Its secret is that it will generate more coins the faster you're running, so try to find ways to safely move around quickly whenever you have it. This swinging rope is perfect for such a trick.

says Amano. "And we decided that collecting coins would do this best. From the very first *Mario* title, coins were always there as some sort of symbolic element to help users understand the game naturally rather than forcing it on them. However, for *New Super Mario Bros 2*, we have greatly increased the importance of these coins."

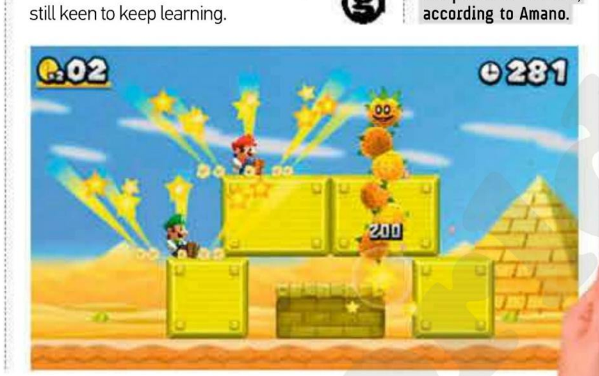
Undoubtedly the biggest repercussion of the focus on coins is the emergence of *NSMB2*'s Coin Rush mode, which wrings the most out of the Cram School's level designs by encouraging players to learn and master ninja-like *Mario* skills in the pursuit of high coin tallies. It's a fantastic pick-up-and-play mode that has truly extended the life of *NSMB2* beyond its main story mode and fits into the same five-minute pockets that iPhone gaming has come to dominate, though Amano maintains that the rise of mobile gaming has not been an influence on *Mario*'s design.

"I think this mode adds more tension and replayability due to only having one life and the goal of collecting coins," he explains. "Therefore, we did not actually develop this mode considering the mobile market or recent preferences of the users. We just tried to create a game that can be accessible to a wide range of users, which can be played any time and which users can keep coming back to for a long time."

Interestingly, Coin Rush may be a side effect of another change in the business: digital distribution. *New Super Mario Bros 2* is Nintendo's first full game to also be available as a download, and so the game's designers created Coin Rush, aware that players who chose to buy the digital version would always have the game loaded onto their 3DS and would need a reason to keep returning to it.

Forging roads into digital distribution while also calling upon new blood within its teams, Nintendo's experiments are changing the way its games are designed, and those changes are set to continue. As it turns its attention to the next digital frontier, paid DLC, it is also looking to gamers for guidance on level design.

According to a recent Iwata Asks interview, new DLC levels will appear later in the year, but only once the team has gauged the reaction to the main game. Then work will begin on new stages designed around the tastes of the public so that they are more likely to spend money on them. "Even if we think of an element that we find fun and enjoyable, if users wouldn't feel the same way it means that it will not be accepted in the way we have intended once it is out in the market," says Amano. Although he's graduated from the Cram School, he's obviously still keen to keep learning.



Below The two-player co-op mode isn't as accomplished as in *NSMB Wii*, but this is the first time co-op has been done in a handheld *Mario* and was made possible by the power of the 3DS, according to Amano.

→ FURTHER READING

NowGamer.com



NowGamer.com will be reviewing some of the biggest games of 2012 through September and October, while looking towards the year ahead. Find *Dishonored*, *Assassin's Creed III* and *Resident Evil 6* reviews online, alongside *World Of Warcraft: Mists Of Pandaria* and *Medal Of Honor: Warfighter* guides. And don't forget to head over to the *Grand Theft Auto V* hub for all the debauched news as it breaks.

All About Space



Issue 4 of **All About Space** gazes into deep space and reveals how science and technology seek to uncover the far reaches of the universe. Inside there are also articles on space tourism, Saturn's rings, comets and more, including an interview with Sir Patrick Moore. **All About Space** issue 4 is on sale now in all good newsagents, and digitally at **www.greatdigitalmags.com**.

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LAUDER PARTNERS BUYS ONLIVE IN SUBSTANTIAL ORGANISATION RESHUFFLE





Below Despite both prominently featuring police chases, *Most Wanted* and *Hot Pursuit* differ dramatically.

(CALLING ALL CARS)

Most Wanted

→ Why EA chose Burnout developer Criterion to take the wheel of the entire Need For Speed series

For the past few years, *Need For Speed* has been an experiment for many developers. Be it EA Black Box, Slightly Mad Studios, EA Montreal or Criterion Games, EA's vision at one point in time was seemingly to create numerous branches of the franchise that could all celebrate individual success under a group banner. This dream is now dead. Far from being a disappointment, mind, Electronic Arts has embraced Criterion for what it does best, its reward coming in the form of the entire series from here on out.

"We're really excited to have the keys to such a historic franchise," EA executive producer Mark Webster recently told **games™**. "Many of us grew up with it, and as I said when we were doing *Hot Pursuit*, I remember seeing the original in 1990 when I joined EA on the first 3DO. It was a real moment, like, 'This is next gen!' and we've had a few of those moments since. It's such a powerful premise. That was our creative centre."

There's little doubt that *Hot Pursuit* remains a highlight within the recent *Need For Speed* canon, other titles such as *Shift* and its successor offering an engaging, if not entirely successful, representation of what the series used to mean. But Criterion is the obvious choice to bring the franchise back to where EA sees it: leading the way in the arcade racer space. Somewhat surprisingly, the developer was as excited to take on such duties as the publisher was to hand them over.

Criterion's creative developer, Craig Sullivan, explains: "I've been a fan of *Need For Speed* since the original game and I work with a lot of like-minded people. We'd wanted to make a *Need For Speed* game for a long time. I've been at Criterion for 15 years, and while we were making the *Burnout* games, we said that we'd love to make a *Need For Speed* game. So we said, 'How about we get a shot at that?' and EA said okay."

THAT SHOT HAS now turned into it standing alongside *Burnout* as one of Criterion's premier games, and, because of that, there are far more personal touches being included in the upcoming *Most Wanted* that, arguably, wouldn't have been apparent had EA kept it a little closer to its chest. With a long-term plan now in place, and millions of fans who have

"Alex Ward always jokes that even if we made a game about jelly it'd have Autolog in it"
Craig Sullivan, creative developer

→ DARK SOULS DIRECTOR HIDETAKA MIYAZAKI CONSIDERING IMPLEMENTING AN EASY MODE FOR NEXT GAME

certain expectations when it comes to the *Need For Speed* series, the UK developer's job isn't as easy as just attempting to innovate on or polish up an old experience.

"The good thing about *Need For Speed* is that it should stand as something that's current and innovative, something that's reflective of our time," Sullivan says. "We're obviously making a game that reflects who we are as Criterion but also what we think *Need For Speed* should be. And it can be many things. I think when you pigeonhole something too much, it starts to stagnate and people get bored of it. Hopefully what we've brought to the table is the fact that *Need For Speed* doesn't have to be what it has been before, or what it might be in the future – it just has to be a really good, fun game. It has to be about friends; it has to be connected; it has to be something you can play online or offline and be fun in both."

Given *Burnout*'s recent disappearance from the scene – the last anyone saw of it was the very much under the radar *Burnout Crash!* – it would seem that *Need For Speed* could be EA's way of trying to fill that void. Criterion, however, is keen to avoid such a position, not only inadvertently hinting at its own creation's future, but also how much freedom the developer has been given with regard to direction. "I think it's a natural change," Sullivan begins. "There are things we'd do in *Burnout* that we probably wouldn't do in a *Need For Speed* game. And similarly, there are things in *Need For Speed* that don't belong in *Burnout*. They're two very separate things and the only connecting factor is that Criterion makes both of those games. We're not trying to merge the two things together. We'll make another *Burnout* at some point and people will ask if it has any of the features from *Need For Speed* in it. And of course it will, because it'll be the same people making it! Alex Ward always jokes that even if we made a game about jelly – whatever the fuck that might be – it'd have Autolog in it. It'd probably even have a version of Easy Drive, but it'd be called Easy Jelly or something. The movies that Quentin Tarantino makes are very different but kind of the same, if you know what I mean. And that's not a bad thing. That's a level of quality... a style. So yeah, *Burnout* and *Need For Speed* are similar in that we make them."

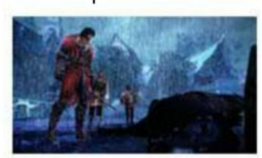
Adopted Children

Five franchises that have switched to other developers



Deus Ex

After the first two games were left in the very capable hands of Ion Storm, Eidos Montreal was handed the really rather difficult task of trying to revive a franchise that had a very loyal and expectant fan base. Clearly not intimidated by such an ask, Eidos Montreal delivered a game that not only lived up to the name, but arguably even surpassed it.



Castlevania

We have little doubt that Konami will continue to churn out *Castlevania* games, but it struck gold when it discovered little-known Spanish developer MercurySteam. *Lords Of Shadow* is one of the only iterations to make *Castlevania* work in 3D, and we expect a lot more from the studio if it hits the upcoming sequel out of the park.



Max Payne

Two games developed by Remedy, with the third bought and created by the one and only Rockstar. While it was clearly still inspired by the originals, the most interesting aspect of *Max Payne 3* was how much of Rockstar's own formula was injected into the experience, making it more polished, and in many ways more entertaining, than its predecessors.



Halo

There aren't too many IPs that can claim to be as big or influential as *Halo*, hence the massive size of the job on 343 Industries' shoulders for its first original entry. Turned into a multimillion-selling franchise by its creator and long-term developer Bungie, Microsoft and 343 have to supply a game of epic proportions just to stay on track.



Devil May Cry

If there's another franchise that left its community in as much uproar as this one, we can't think of it. When Capcom announced that the next *Devil May Cry* would be developed by Ninja Theory, many were ready to storm the developer's HQ, baying for blood. As the months have passed, there have been promising hints that the studio has the concept down. Here's hoping...


ARENANET TEMPORARILY HALTS DIGITAL SALES OF GUILD WARS 2 DUE TO HIGH VOLUME OF PLAYERS ON SERVERS

#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Nick Jones

PS Vita: Sony's pulling in the wrong direction



At this year's Gamescom, Sony looked to right its E3 wrongs and put its recently released PS Vita handheld front and centre. The Vita has lots of games from major franchises, said Sony, and here there were a bunch of new ones. Here's a *Killzone* game and a *LittleBigPlanet* game, a *Need For Speed* game and – drum roll, please – a *CALL OF DUTY* game. With, oh yes, ONLINE MULTIPLAYER! A major part of Sony's plan to make Vita a success seems to be to throw as many popular brands at it as it can and hope that something sticks. People like *Assassin's Creed*, right? Then they'll love a portable *Assassin's Creed* game, won't they? Won't they?

I think there's a problem with this strategy, namely that games with this kind of detail and depth not only deserve to be played on as big a TV as you can get your hands on, but they also require that amount of space and time to be played in the first place. Gamers have a different attitude towards games depending on where and when they're gaming. Sitting down in front of a TV with a game that's as epic in scale as *Assassin's Creed* is a major commitment in time and effort. You want the game world to wash over you, to become absorbed in that particular digital frontier. It's really hard to replicate the effect of having your vision completely filled with a game world on a five-inch screen. I don't care how lush the OLED is or how many touch controls you throw at it; a game like *Assassin's Creed* will always be best enjoyed on a big TV.

Most people play portable games in those moments when they're trying to kill a few minutes or hours of time: on the bus or train, before going to sleep, or while guiltily passing time before the weekend starts. These are not the times when you want to be going on some epic and challenging quest to save the world. That requires a level of concentration that's impossible with a handheld console. It's easy to get distracted when you're out and about; you don't want to be put off by some old lady dropping her change on the bus when you're screaming round Metro Park at 800mph in *WipEout*, and it's also pretty hard to become emotionally involved with a character when you're nodding off at night. No, these are the perfect times to pull out your smartphone and obliterate those moments with a quick blast on *Angry Birds* or test your brainpower with Dr Kawashima.

■ Nintendo's DS consoles eventually came into their own.



■ Bite-sized iPhone games aren't all there is to portable gaming.



Ah yes, Nintendo. The undisputed world leader in portable game design. With the DS, Nintendo deliberately created something that didn't slot in with conventional controller-based gaming. The downside was that it was a chore for third-parties to port their franchises to it – hence all the games that used the bottom screen for simple maps and menus – but the upside is that you get games that aren't possible on conventional systems. And that's all because of the DS's unique controls, which enable different types of interactivity and games.

Now, please, don't get me wrong. I think the Vita is a cracking piece of kit. I love the fact that it has so many ways in which to interact with a virtual toy. I love that it has a gorgeous OLED screen and is super-quick and connected and all the rest of it. But I worry about Sony's strategy. It should have learned this lesson with the PSP. The most successful PSP games are the ones where you can dip in and out, and the best games are the ones you wish you could play on your TV. Just like the Vita. And a lot of the time you could. Are you going to play *The Warriors* on PS2 or PSP? Well, the PS2 version is the best one, right? Okay, no contest; I'm getting the PS2 one.

This is the other thing that worries me: Cross Buy. It's the scheme where you get a free copy of the Vita version if you buy the game on PS3. Obviously, it's inspired by those Blu-rays where you get the DVD and a digital edition of the movie in question. The hope must be that people will buy a Vita to take advantage of the free game they just got. So… I've completed the game on PS3 and I'm going to go out and buy a £200 console to play through it again? Doesn't add up to me. The problem with the Vita for me is that I own one and I don't really need to. I can get all those same core gaming experiences on my PS3 and all those casual gaming ones on my iPhone. At the moment it's a redundant gaming device.

It doesn't have to be this way. The Vita, like the DS, has a load of controls and inputs that the PS3 doesn't have, so it should, in time, lead to game types that aren't possible on home consoles. What Sony needs is variation, innovation and exclusivity. If Vita is to succeed then it needs to offer experiences that aren't possible on any other format, not just replicate those that are.

If Vita is to succeed then it needs to offer experiences that aren't possible on any other format, not just replicate those that are

Nick Jones is editor in chief of





Splinter Cell Blacklist

→ Ubisoft reintroduces a classic gaming icon to the world

There's no shortage of iconic videogame characters lining up for an all-important reinvention on the eve of the next generation, but not many fit the bill so robustly as *Splinter Cell*'s grizzled Sam Fisher. *Splinter Cell Blacklist* has a 50-something Fisher looking spryer than ever, ambling up cliff faces and thrashing three men at a time with the new Killing in Motion system like an ultramodern Ezio Auditore da Firenze. Stealth remains a vital component, but Ubisoft has taken the training wheels off, enabling players to undertake missions in their preferred playstyle. Admittedly it does sound like another genreless action-stealth hybrid in Ubisoft's increasingly cluttered catalogue of similar titles, but with a darker tone – not to mention a controversial torture mechanic – Fisher might just prove to be a real threat out in the field.

BIT BY BIT
with Howard Scott Warshaw



Is Ouya the next true leap in gaming or just a small step forward?



I'm toying with the idea that life is a game. I mean, if games are my life then does it follow logically that my life is a game? Perhaps not. And if my life isn't a game, does that make it any less of a playground? I played myself in the Angry Video Game Nerd movie recently. I flew out to the secret location and shot my scenes with the Nerd and had a lot of fun. But there's nothing new there; I've been playing myself most of my life.

What is new in the playground is the Ouya! Yet another in a series of console launches – I've seen so many over the years. Time and time again I've witnessed 'the next breakthrough in home interactive entertainment'. Once or twice it was true, but usually it is simply the next incremental step. Ouya, with open architecture and public funding, may indeed be a breakthrough that redefines the industry in fundamental ways. More than a next generation, this could be the dawning of a whole new world of videogaming... or not. Ouya or Ou-no? Only time will tell.

But you've heard quite enough from that quarter recently, so I'm not going to celebrate the latest platform launch by telling you what you already know. No!

I'm going to tell you about the very first next-generation console launch in history, the Atari 5200. This happened without the benefit of seeing Moore's law in action, before the videogame industry had decided whether it was a fad or had a future, before the idea of a console life cycle even existed. Sherman, set the WABAC machine to early 1982...

Back then there were two kinds of people at Atari: those who wanted the 2600 to last forever and those who wanted to see gaming take the next step forward. And then there was the third kind of two kinds of people: the ones who lost bladder control over the idea of cutting our own throat by releasing a new console before the existing riverbed was parched. We had people designing a new machine – a highly coveted position within the company – and we had people supporting the existing machines. Remember, this was early 1982, before the first hints of the coming calamitous crash! Everyone knew there would have to be a new machine, but no one had ever done a 'next-generation' machine before. The real trick is to be on time with the new hardware. Just as your sales fall off the old console, the new one steps in and the baton is passed. The problem: no one had ever seen this before, so they had no idea where the sweet spot was. We applied the classic Atari strategy: milk the old and delay the new. The introduction was delayed as long as possible because no one had ever introduced a machine to compete with their existing console before. And they milked and they milked until one day they saw the well was running dry. That's when they discovered the lag time from drawing board to production with a new console. Uh-oh!

We applied the classic Atari strategy: milk the old and delay the new. And they milked and they milked until one day they saw the well was running dry

■ The Atari 5200 was too little, too late to save the videogames industry from collapsing.

But fear not! As the mighty silver boxes demonstrate, if there's one thing Atari knows how to do it's repackage. So when the chips hit the fan, Atari did an amazing thing: we released the 5200 game console, which was simply the Atari 400/800 computer in a new box with a new controller. We hit the market late with old technology! And a good job we did, because shortly thereafter the industry crashed and rebooted. I helped! It would have been a shame to waste some actual new hardware development on one of the shortest product life cycles in history, and how suiting that it followed the longest life cycle, the 2600.

And now there's a new console? Another playmate for the playground? That's okay; we can still have fun whatever's going on. For instance, I'm considering doing some development myself. How about *ET* for the Ouya? Now there's a concept worthy of a bit of toying.

Maybe life is a game and maybe it isn't. This much is certain: when you devote your life to the videogame industry, there are always new toys. The tricky bit lies in knowing when you're the one getting played!

Howard Scott Warshaw is a videogames development veteran. He allegedly killed the games industry with *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial*. We're sure he's sorry.



Metal Gear Solid goes open world

Running on Kojima Productions' new Fox Engine, Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes takes Big Boss into an incredible-looking open-world game. But beyond that, Konami has released very few details. Here's what our readers expect from the next Metal Gear…

"I think it will be a remake of *Metal Gear* of some description – not *Solid*, but the original MSX *Metal Gear*. Everyone's saying that's Big Boss in the image because of the Militaires Sans Frontières badge on his shoulder, but to me he's too young. If this was a retelling of the first game, Snake could have been part of Militaires Sans Frontières. Anyway, damn exited!"
Paddy Murphy, Facebook

"Long-ass cut-scenes."
Warren Weathers, Twitter

"Maybe a sequel to *Peace Walker*, adapting its larger environment and breadth of missions. I think I spy the MSF logo on his arm…"
Tenspeed Jack, Twitter

"40 hours of cinematics with roughly 20 minutes of actual gameplay."
Road, Twitter

"The obvious answer would be lots of cut-scenes, but really, I'd like to see Kojima try something new and unexpected. The wider audience will doubtless demand online multiplayer, but I expect a focus on the single-player experience and building the storyline. And Otacon. He's got to be in there."
Merman, games™ forum

WHY I ❤...

Elite

JAMIE KEEN,
UBISOFT MONTREAL

*“**Elite** is probably my favourite game of all time, believe it or not. Way back when, it was the first game that probably gave me that feeling that there was this giant universe; this possibility that can go beyond just this little box and take you off into a universe. It came with this book called* The Dark Wheel *or something that gave this narrative context to it. You just imagined it was this expansive universe where you can go and do anything. It was a turning point. This was what we could do with games; we could let people’s imaginations run wild.”*

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"There was this giant universe; this possibility that can go beyond just this little box and take you off into a universe"

JAMIE KEEN, UBISOFT MONTREAL


12
XBOX 360.
XBOX LIVE
PS3
PlayStation.3
PC DVD ROM
FIRAXIS GAMES
2K GAMES
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OUR LAST HOPE
WINNER OF MORE THAN 20 E3 AWARDS
BEST OF
GAME CRITICS AWARD
WINNER
gameinformer
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WINNER
OFFICIAL
PC GAMER
SELECTION
E3 2012
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PREVIEWS CONTENTS

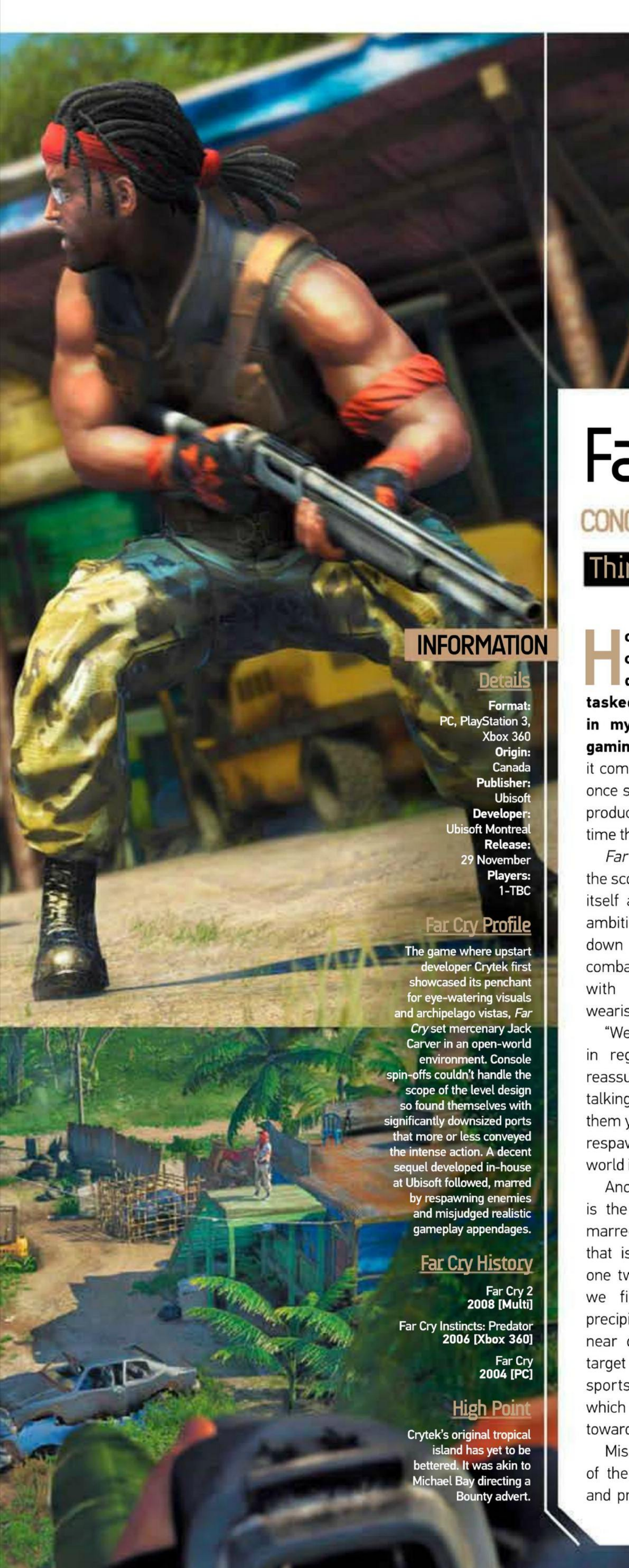


FAR CRY GOES LEFT 4 DEAD

IN AN unexpected twist, *Far Cry 3* will also feature a co-operative four-player campaign set six months before the events of the single-player. The story is pretty thin, with four mercenaries venturing to the island for revenge and owed remittance, only to find themselves overwhelmed by the local militia. Specific missions and areas have been created solely for co-op, making it an experience completely distinct from the single-player element.

With Ubisoft Montreal busy on the main campaign, development duties fell to Ubisoft Massive, which says the team has been busy creating "a unique campaign with combat scenarios that encourage and reward team play". Only time will tell whether it's a worthy extension of the core experience.

Right: Using a camera to survey the island's atrocities will be an essential part of the game's campaign.



INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin:
Canada
Publisher:
Ubisoft
Developer:
Ubisoft Montreal
Release:
29 November
Players:
1-TBC

Far Cry Profile

The game where upstart developer Crytek first showcased its penchant for eye-watering visuals and archipelago vistas, *Far Cry* set mercenary Jack Carver in an open-world environment. Console spin-offs couldn't handle the scope of the level design so found themselves with significantly downsized ports that more or less conveyed the intense action. A decent sequel developed in-house at Ubisoft followed, marred by respawning enemies and misjudged realistic gameplay appendages.

Far Cry History

Far Cry 2
2008 [Multi]

Far Cry Instincts: Predator
2006 [Xbox 360]

Far Cry
2004 [PC]

High Point

Crytek's original tropical island has yet to be bettered. It was akin to Michael Bay directing a Bounty advert.

Far Cry 3

CONCEPT ■ A tropical sandbox first-person shooter that casts players as an out-of-his-depth tourist battling with the mentally unstable locals.

Things are getting a bit crazy

How far is too far? In a medium constantly in a state of growth, developers often find themselves tasked with pushing the envelope in myriad ways as we leap from one gaming experience to the next. But when it comes down to game design, an idea that once seemed like an inspired concept during production can often feel overstated by the time the game reaches retail.

Far Cry 2 suffered unnecessarily due to the scope of its creative vision. Realism found itself at the forefront of Ubisoft Montreal's ambitious sequel, forcing players to suck down malaria pills at regular intervals to combat the effects of the disease, wrestle with jamming firearms, and perform wearisome vehicle repairs.

"We're addressing a lot of people's fears in regards to the *Far Cry 2* systems," reassures lead game designer Jamie Keen, talking to **games™**. "[We've been] showing them you're not going to get those frustrating respawny things, and moving around the world is much easier."

Another irritation addressed, then. Gone is the meandering between missions that marred *Far Cry 2*, replaced with an urgency that is best described as unhinged. Given one twentieth of the entire map to explore, we find ourselves on the edge of a precipice, looking over a bandit camp in the near distance. The quickest route to our target is the hang glider that some extreme sports nut has kindly left unattended, which we promptly commandeer and coast towards the outpost.

Missing a jetty several metres outside of the encampment, we land in the water and proceed to surreptitiously approach the target, only for a shark to intervene, taking a bite out of our hero.

"So far we've shown very driven, narrative-focused sequences," says Keen of the gameplay footage released to date. "The big question in people's mind is, 'What is the in between?' We're now showing people how the world is filled up, how we're putting life into the jungle and adding that emergent gameplay in there."

There's definitely a pervading sense that the jungle is much more alive in the third entry. Alongside the volatile locals that protagonist Jason Brody will have to deal with, wildlife is much more vicious than the largely herbivorous inhabitants of the previous archipelago. Barrelling across the wilderness in a Jeep, we trample, harass and generally aggravate more wildlife than the combined occupancy of London Zoo.

/// It's a distraction, though, and the game is absolutely brimming with similar diversions from the main quests. We're only given one mission to complete – remove a jamming device from a nearby radio tower to unscramble the in-game map – but we've every reason to ignore it. Knife-throwing mini-games, poker dens and races all populate the world, making this tropical sandbox a more thriving open world than the majority of urban-set alternatives.

For Keen, a lot of the strides made in *Far Cry 3*'s more expansive world are borne from the internal relationship between the Ubisoft Montreal teams, each working on new projects that push the boundaries of their respective genres.

"It shows the strength and depth of Ubisoft as a whole with the different types of things

we're bringing to the table," he enthuses. "You get a slight competition between the teams where everyone wants to be top dog, with *Assassin's Creed III* and *Watch Dogs* being developed internally as well. It's a really exciting time to be around that stuff because everyone really wants to push things forward, and having that internal competition between teams makes pressure, but it's good pressure. Creatively, it's good for Ubisoft as well that we're pushing a lot of boundaries and not relying on the same formula. The chances that people are taking to push things forward are really exciting."

That co-operative relationship is perhaps why there's a distinct flavour of other Ubisoft franchises lurking on the fringes of *Far Cry 3*'s gameplay. Stealth has a much larger role to play, and the mechanics are as strong as the gunplay. Using a bow, we sneak towards an unsuspecting target, with an on-screen prompt signalling his alertness level. The common ancestry between *Far Cry 3* and both *Assassin's Creed* and *Splinter Cell* is keenly felt.

"We've had a lot of influence from the guys working on *Assassin's Creed*, just in terms of know-how and having been through a lot of the people before," acknowledges Keen. "And the guys from *Splinter Cell* as well, which I think you'll see a lot in our stealth mechanics. Having the knowledge and deep bench provides us with a lot of answers to the questions we have. It enables us to move on from that point and bring our own flavour to games."

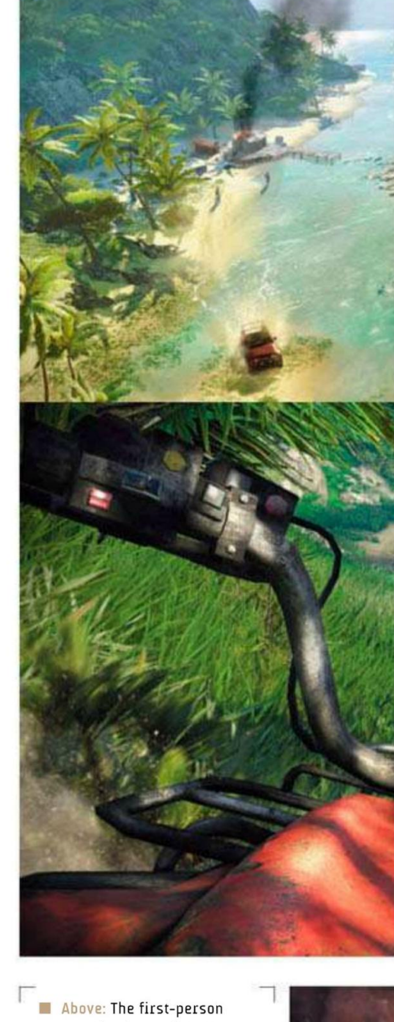
The studio is also mindful of the franchise heritage to date. While *Far Cry 2* had its failings, Keen still holds the sequel in high regard. "*Far Cry 2* still stands out," he insists. "Some of the things you see in *Far Cry 2* I think are still yet to be equalled. The vistas you get during night time are really breathtaking, and that's definitely a torch that we want to carry on with. [In *Far Cry 3*] there are a few shots that make you take a step back and say, 'That looks great.' It is definitely one of the key parts we're pushing forward, this idea that no matter what platform we're on, we're pushing the boundaries as much as we possibly can."

/// The *Far Cry* franchise to date hasn't been afraid to experiment with gameplay ideas. While *Far Cry 2* concerned itself mostly with immersive realism, previous console entry *Far Cry Instincts* enabled players to utilise animalistic powers to boost speed and strength. *Far Cry 3* won't delve into such silly depths, but Jason will find himself consuming

CRY ME A RIVER

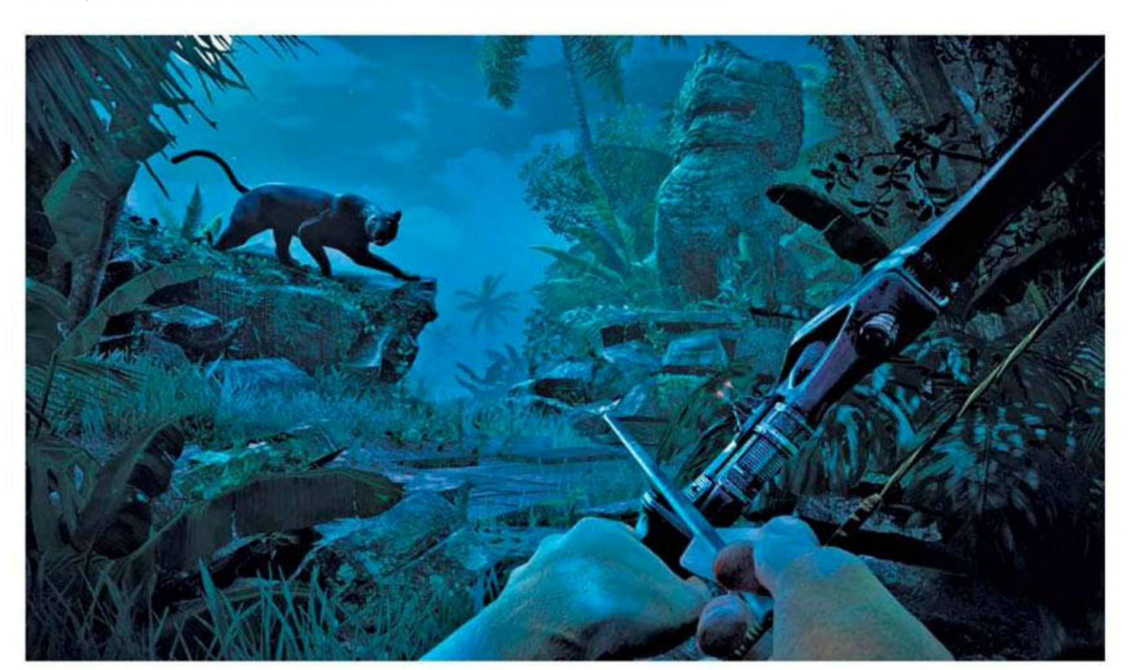
SHUNTED FROM its original September release date, *Far Cry 3* has found itself in a crowded window, alongside fellow Ubisoft threequel *Assassin's Creed III*. Asked whether Ubisoft Montreal would have preferred a wider gap between the two releases, Keen avoids addressing the competition directly, instead focusing on the benefits of the extra development time. "In terms of what moving the date has allowed us to do, it has been nothing but good," he emphasises. "I think it lets us polish the game to the point where we're shipping a game we're proud of. That little bit of extra time means we don't have to cut features; we can have this huge, wide feature set that we want to have. We can make sure it is looking as good as it possibly can on all platforms. It means we haven't had to compromise in any areas."

> "I think the most important thing for us looking forward to next gen is understanding the games that we're making"
>
> **JAMIE KEEN** UBISOFT MONTREAL

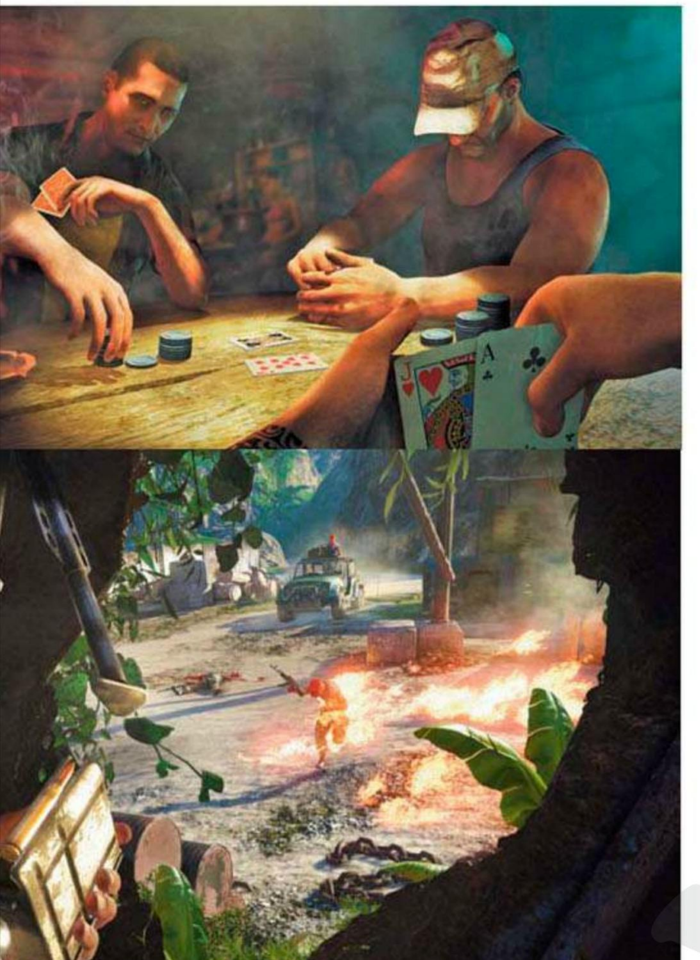




Above: The first-person perspective is persistent throughout the game, including when you're in control of vehicles. It certainly makes driving a car off a cliff a much more intense experience. Right: Whether you bother with mini-games or not, this game of poker will most likely have a deadly twist to it. Below: *Far Cry 3* doesn't shy away from graphic violence. Alongside drug-induced nightmares, gory executions and naked locals, players can expect a much grittier take on events this time around.



Above: In much the same way that original *Far Cry* developer Crytek has returned to the jungle in *Crysis 3*, *Far Cry 3* places an emphasis on stealth to survive the harsh wilderness. Both games also highlight a bow and arrow as the weapon of choice. Carnivorous wildlife can be used to the player's advantage, attacking enemies and savaging anyone who stands between you and your objective. It adds another interesting dynamic to the game's multifaceted world.



various narcotics that will give him an edge on the battlefield.

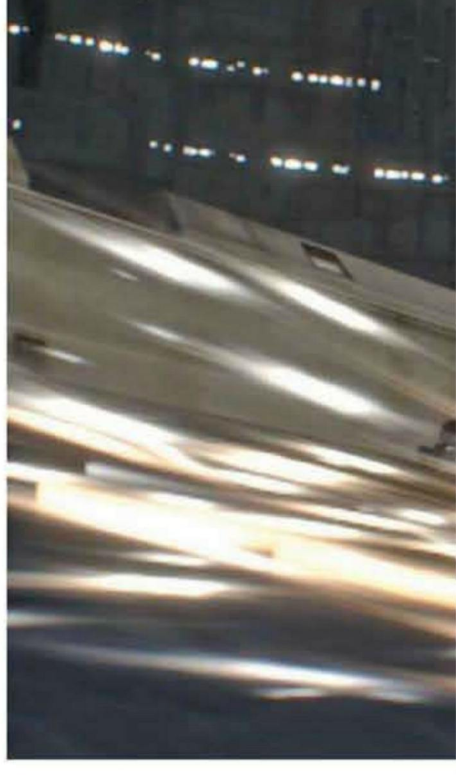
The first-person perspective maintained throughout the campaign is fundamental to the immersion. Whether caught in a tense firefight, bounding across the countryside in a 4x4, or spacing out on some drug-induced trip, this viewpoint has been a crucial component for the Canadian developer.

"It was something that we always wanted to push as much as we could," explains Keen. "It was an important part of maintaining immersion. There are some places where we do break it, but we wanted to hold to it as much as we can. I think we want players to feel this connection to the character, to feel that this emotional journey that they're going through is something that is actually happening to them. That's the good thing with the first-person perspective: you get that automatic association because the viewpoint is happening to you and not an avatar in front of you. Holding on to that is really important, and making sure that it's realised nicely around the rest of the world when you're moving around, crouching, diving, falling and driving. Adding details in there really helps maintain that illusion."

/// And as we finish our brief excursion to this tropical paradise, it's all too clear that we've barely scratched the surface of the vast wilderness. With such an overwhelming game world at our feet, we ask Keen where he expects the franchise to go after this entry and into a new generation of hardware.

"I think the most important thing for us looking forward to next gen is understanding the games that we're making," he muses. "We've got a good recipe now for the world and how to create a good experience in terms of creating a strong narrative structure and then a really full world around it that keep people engaged. Any kind of movements forward in processing power and graphics power are only going to help that. The most important thing is having the gameplay questions sorted first and foremost so we understand how to make a good, crafted gameplay experience, and then that is something we can transfer from platform to platform, and we're looking at that now with making sure we're pushing it across the board no matter what, console or PC. That gameplay formula doesn't change; anything that happens with processing power will move that forward and add more fidelity."

Returning to the present, it's clear that Ubisoft has a massive undertaking on its hands. It's shaping up to be one of the most awe-inspiring open worlds we've ever had the pleasure of exploring, and this is just the surface. It's safe to say that when we step on *Far Cry 3*'s shores come November, we're not quite sure what to expect.



Star Wars 1313

CONCEPT ■ LucasArts gives *Star Wars* a dark, gritty feel backed up by visuals that will make you question whether what you're seeing is actually legitimate.

The Star Wars game we deserve, or yet more sci-fi fodder?

Despite the first film coming out in 1977, some truly offensive videogames and a recent reputation for letting its audience down, the *Star Wars* name still carries with it tremendous weight. One would assume by now that fans would have tempered their expectations a little, realising that just because those two iconic words adorn a title does not mean the finished product is going to change the world. Despite all this, *Star Wars 1313* has the hype train all worked up again.

To LucasArts' credit, achieving it this time around may be more impressive than ever before. With no formats officially announced and nothing but select video footage and screens to go off, the developer should be given an award for how it has managed to stir up the hyperbole with so little to show.

Naturally, the most stirring aspect of the next game in the *Star Wars* franchise is the jaw-dropping visuals being crafted. They're polished to an astonishingly high standard, and you'd be forgiven for expecting a 'not representative of in-game graphics' footnote at some point – but it never arrives. Although more than likely running on a high-end PC that costs the same as a small country and is reflective of what we can expect from next-gen consoles, there's no denying how impressive the digital world LucasArts has created is. It's all well and good saying visuals don't guarantee a great experience, but they do a damn good job in getting the wider audience interested.

/// Of course, such excitement piles on the pressure for the studio to deliver; the core of *1313* has got to be every bit as stunning as its outer layers. LucasArts has been keen to stress that the focus of the journey is on a bounty hunter, so while there's every chance of encountering a Jedi, it's highly unlikely you'll ever be wielding a Lightsaber or using the Force. For many, that will be a turn-off. *The Force Unleashed* may have had more flaws than anyone cares to remember, but that opening sequence featuring Darth Vader proved there was potential to do more with the lore than had been done previously.

In contrast to this, concentrating on a more human tale does have its benefits, namely the ability to tell a more Han Solo-esque narrative than that of Luke Skywalker. This appears to be the direction LucasArts is eager to head in too. The latest *Star Wars* is centred on the protagonist's expedition to Level 1313, a subterranean section of Coruscant that plays host to a conspiracy of some kind. All information seems to hint at the attempt to retrieve a set of rings that lay beneath the galactic capital. It's the structure, however, where the game's true intent will come into play. As is slowly becoming the way, LucasArts seems to be following in the footsteps of *Gears Of War*, *Assassin's Creed* and *Uncharted* to assemble something that constantly pushes action. It's told from a third-person perspective, with characters continually taking cover, scrambling across the environment and making daring leaps to avoid being stranded in a vehicle that has just been blown to hell. It's a smart move by the company, as if this is truly the goal – to produce a game that, both visually and from a gameplay perspective, continually ratchets up the action – then it could be as enthralling as anything Naughty Dog has generated. It's these avenues where production values count for far more than just making tech lovers swoon.

Obviously, *Star Wars 1313* deserves caution. Be it the burnings administered by this series in the past or the fact that it's incredibly early on in its development cycle, you would have to be a fool to throw caution to the wind at this juncture. With that said, the promise is there, LucasArts being in a fabulous position to continually generate curiosity and then deliver when it counts. It's nothing more than the loyal die-hards deserve.

> "Star Wars 1313 dives into a part of the Star Wars mythos that we've always known existed, but never had a chance to visit"
>
> PAUL MEEGAN LUCASARTS

INFORMATION

Details

Format: TBA
Origin: US
Publisher: LucasArts
Developer: In-house
Release: TBA
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Although LucasArts isn't as prominent as it once was, its catalogue remains incredibly impressive. It's swimming in *Star Wars* games, as expected, but the likes of *Monkey Island*, *Sam & Max* and *Maniac Mansion* will quite possibly always be remembered as the highlight of the adventure genre. Consistency has never been its forte, mind.

Developer History

Star Wars: The Force Unleashed **2008 [Multi]**

Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic **2003 [Multi]**

Star Wars: X-Wing vs TIE Fighter **1997 [PC]**

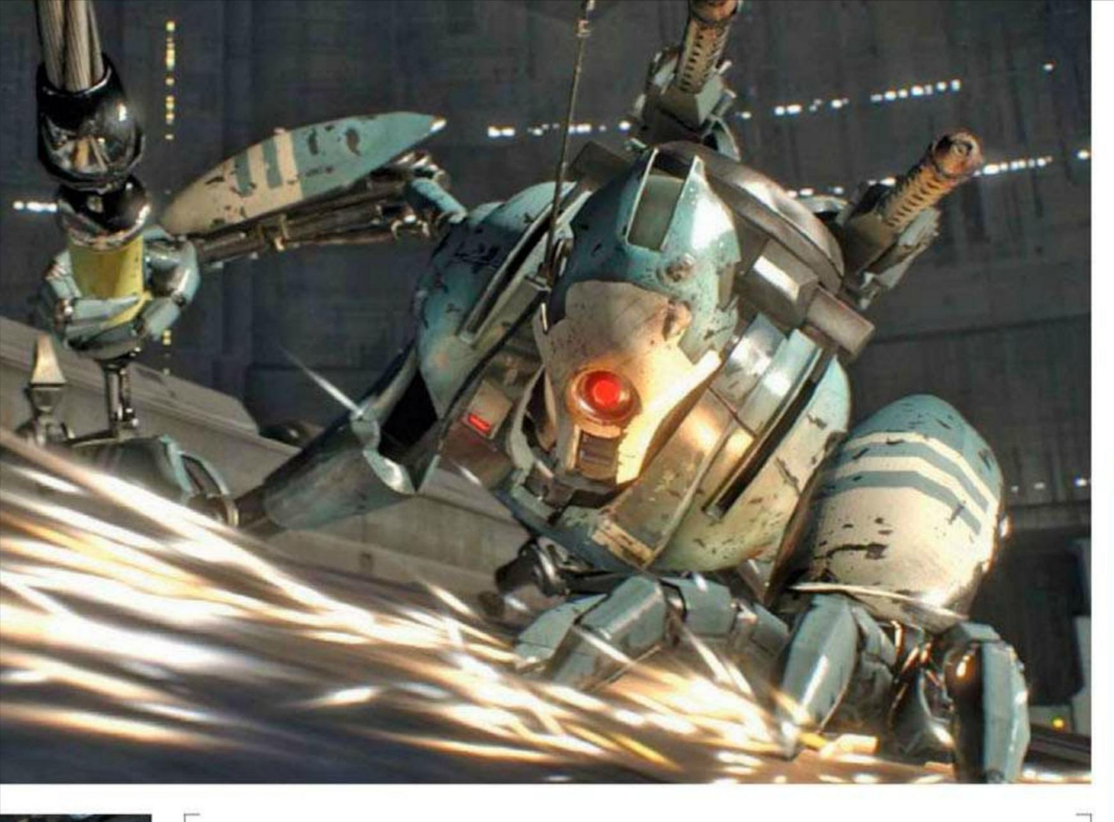
Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge **1991 [Multi]**

High Point

Surely many arguments can be made, but the *Monkey Island* series is a fan favourite, recently proved thanks to the loving updates the first two games received on Xbox Live Arcade and other formats.



■ Right: *Star Wars 1313* is going to be an action-packed experience, and it seems LucasArts has had one eye on what Naughty Dog's been up to.



ASSUMING CONTROL

IT'S ANYONE'S GUESS what features *Star Wars 1313* will pack in when it finally gets released, but the trailer does seem to hint at what could be included. The first of these is the obvious appearance of a companion throughout the recently released footage. With this second person talking directly to the player character, there's every chance LucasArts has this planned as a co-op outing. Naturally, this is nothing more than a hunch, but at the very least this mysterious second man will play an important role in proceedings. Aside from this, expect a very varied combat style that jumps from your standard third-person shooter to in-your-face, close-range melee attacks. *Star Wars* gadgetry will have to be worked in to some degree too.



Left: To tie in to both the lore of the series and to satisfy desperate fans, a large range of *Star Wars* weapons and items will be on hand. Below: These two figures have been constant throughout all of *Star Wars 1313*'s released material so far, hinting that the narrative will also focus heavily on them both. How the constant presence of two characters affects the game, especially in terms of co-op, remains to be seen.



1 WHAT WE'VE seen of *GTA V* so far reads like a what's what of, well, *Grand Theft Auto*. So you have the elements like dirt-bike racing making a return, leading to the assumption that it's going to be a world of more open activities than *GTA IV* was.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: UK
Publisher: Rockstar Games
Developer: Rockstar North
Release: Q1 2013
Players: 1-16

Developer Profile

Rockstar North, born DMA Design in 1988, has become the *GTA* studio in recent times, but it wasn't always that way. From the classic *Lemmings*, through *Hired Guns* and onto the likes of *Body Harvest*, there's a lot more to remember beyond the admittedly rather memorable sandbox series.

Developer History

Grand Theft Auto IV
2008 [Multi]

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas
2004 [Multi]

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
2002 [Multi]

Grand Theft Auto
1997 [Multi]

High Point

It's the fan favourite; it nailed everything it had to nail; it had Ray Liotta. *Vice City* is one of the best games in the series, of that there is no doubt.

Grand Theft Auto V

CONCEPT ■ The comeback of one of the most impressive franchises we've ever seen in gaming. The hype will be huge. The game might live up to it.

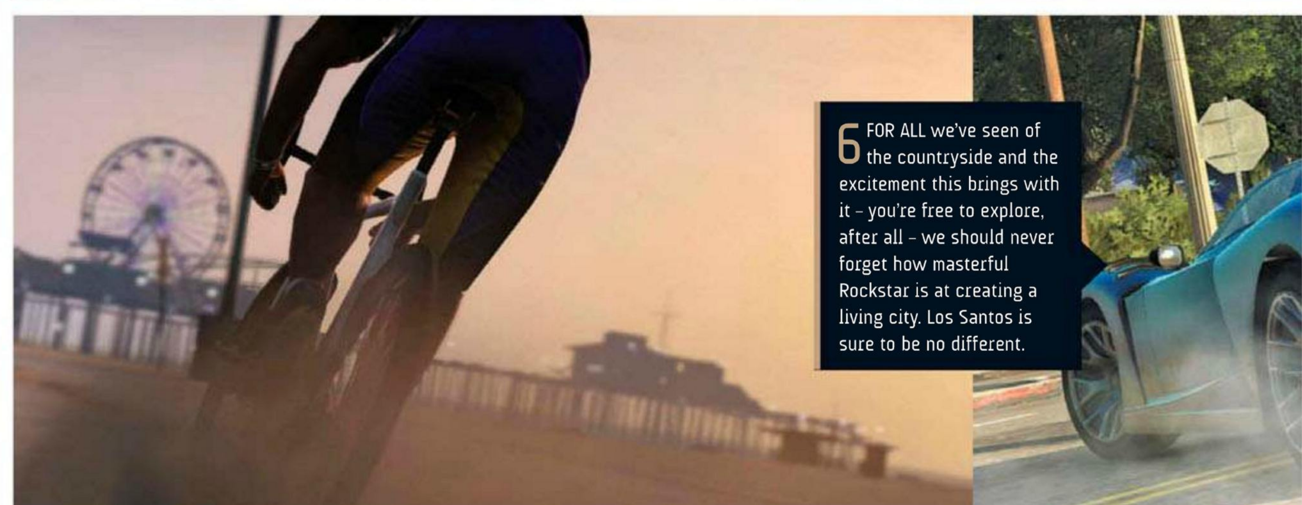
Not to sound too presumptuous, but it really is the return of the king

We still don't know why he moved there. The opening question posed in the trailer released in November 2011 hasn't been answered, and the details surrounding *Grand Theft Auto V* are still thin on the ground. But we're getting there – slowly but surely we're finding out more about Rockstar's next epic, and the publisher is clearly taking great pleasure in leading us all along by the nose. Screenshots are rationed out in small numbers and pored over for hours. Details are noticed. Codes are believed to be broken. And all along, everyone still wonders aloud why he moved there.

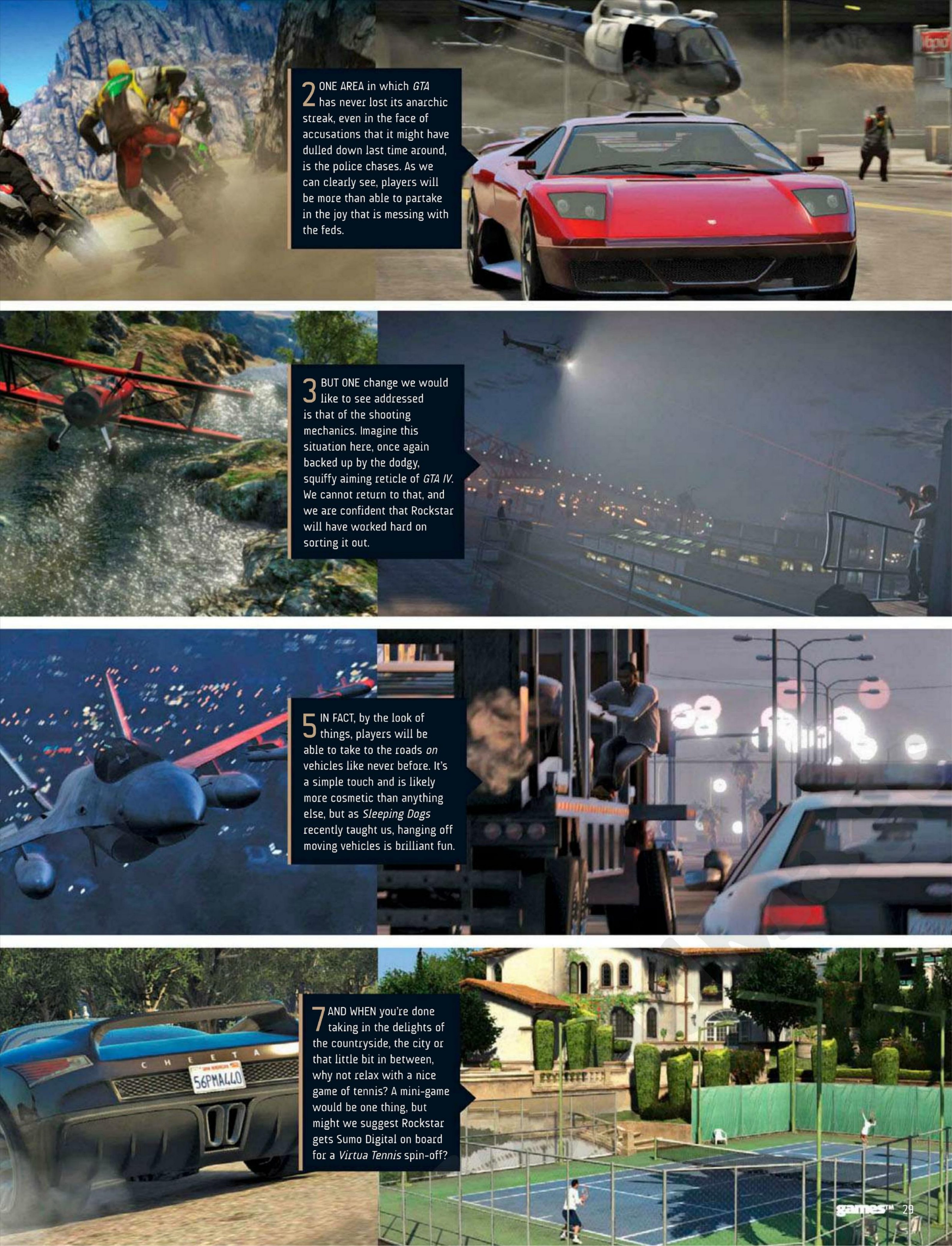
We'll get our answer, and it might be sooner than expected. Some claimed *GTA V* would be one of the first games of the next generation, but we doubt that. As such, it'll need to hit before the new consoles – and that means early next year. Expect the hype to build up exponentially until then, and all hell to break loose when it debuts properly.



4 THERE ARE other areas where we can see straight away that Rockstar has listened and has made changes accordingly. Niko was a mainly flightless character, but our antihero(es) of *GTA V* will be able to take to the skies in all manner of plane-shaped vehicles.



6 FOR ALL we've seen of the countryside and the excitement this brings with it – you're free to explore, after all – we should never forget how masterful Rockstar is at creating a living city. Los Santos is sure to be no different.



2 ONE AREA in which *GTA* has never lost its anarchic streak, even in the face of accusations that it might have dulled down last time around, is the police chases. As we can clearly see, players will be more than able to partake in the joy that is messing with the feds.

3 BUT ONE change we would like to see addressed is that of the shooting mechanics. Imagine this situation here, once again backed up by the dodgy, squiffy aiming reticle of *GTA IV*. We cannot return to that, and we are confident that Rockstar will have worked hard on sorting it out.

5 IN FACT, by the look of things, players will be able to take to the roads *on* vehicles like never before. It's a simple touch and is likely more cosmetic than anything else, but as *Sleeping Dogs* recently taught us, hanging off moving vehicles is brilliant fun.

7 AND WHEN you're done taking in the delights of the countryside, the city or that little bit in between, why not relax with a nice game of tennis? A mini-game would be one thing, but might we suggest Rockstar gets Sumo Digital on board for a *Virtua Tennis* spin-off?

Remember Me

CONCEPT ■ Dontnod's futuristic sci-fi game takes inspiration from many a big hitter but puts an interesting and unique spin on it.

Could Dontnod and Capcom trigger a genre revolution?

Dontnod may just be onto something. While *Remember Me* takes inspiration from the likes of *Assassin's Creed*, *Uncharted* and *Deus Ex*, it has a very unusual twist that, in today's sequel-heavy world, should grab more than a few individuals' attention. Set in a cyberpunk Paris in the year 2084, the core idea revolves around how memories can now be bought and sold. Society has evolved to accept such ideals to the point where 'memory hunters' now exist, a select group who can break into people's minds and toy with their recollections of past events. So far, you may be asking how this differentiates from a handful of other titles, especially with the information that Nilin, our heroine, used to be part of such a unit and now has had her memories stolen. Her mission? To rediscover herself...

It sounds like generic sci-fi fodder, and certainly nothing that should spark the interest above anything else that videogames have to offer. Wonderfully, though, *Remember Me* hints at its worth where it counts. While the trailer doesn't do much in terms of piquing your interest, seeing it in action certainly grabs your attention. Initially, it's the world Dontnod has created that draws you in, a sprawling, neon-filled setting that offers up the opportunity to scramble through or sneak within its shadows, much like Ezio or Nathan Drake. With memories at the heart of the concept, though, it's not just a case of waiting in the darkness until you're ready to move on. In order to obtain vital information about your objective, you have to stealthily enter other people's minds to see what details they have. It may be something as simple as a location, but it's a fascinating take on an old model. Capcom was keen to demonstrate this with Nilin's pursuit of Frank Forlan, the new commander of the Saber Force and a man with a vendetta against the Errorists (see boxout). Rather than simply kill him, though, the character known simply as Edge wants Nilin to trick him into committing suicide.

It's here where *Remember Me* comes into its own and illustrates the promise it could have. Once the target is located, Nilin hacks into his memory to trigger a flashback from a few days prior. In it, Forlan has a falling out with his girlfriend, smashing a mirror as she defiantly storms out. Thanks to the powers at her disposal, Nilin then has the option to modify how the subject recalls this chain of events. A number of objects can be interacted with around the room, suggesting that Dontnod would like to treat such scenarios as a puzzle, or at least layer them with a certain amount of depth. For example, after commanding Forlan to remember knocking a bottle off a table and stumbling across his gun, a brief scuffle with his former squeeze ends the same way as it had in reality due to the safety of the weapon still being on. Cue *Remember Me* rewinding time, giving you a second chance to ensure all the necessary evils fall into place. As Nilin relinquishes her hold on Forlan's mind, he is instantly riddled with guilt for the murder of his love, who is, in reality, still alive. Unable to handle the shame, he takes his own life.

> "Nilin begins her journey to reclaim her identity and discover how she can change the world"
>
> PRESS RELEASE CAPCOM

/// It's a fascinating way to experiment with various techniques that have now become a staple of many genres, but it's down to Dontnod to ensure that these memory raids remain as interesting and original as possible. If it's just a case of trial and error, the novelty will soon wear off, even with everything else the game has to tout. Its showpiece has been unveiled, and for it to remain a serious highlight, it needs to constantly innovate and grow. Capcom certainly seems to think this is possible, and if correct, *Remember Me* could be one of the more interesting titles to be released in 2013.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: France
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Dontnod
Release: May 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

The mysterious Dontnod, founded by former Criterion developer Oskar Guilbert, was barely known before its reveal of *Remember Me* at Gamescom. Teasing the world with its first project a whole 12 months prior, the studio hinted at what was to come by showing its game under the name of *Adrift* to a select few behind closed doors. We imagine, if all goes to plan, it'll be concentrating on *Remember Me* for some time.

Publisher History

Devil May Cry
2001 [PS2]

Resident Evil 4
2005 [Multi]

Dead Rising
2006 [Multi]

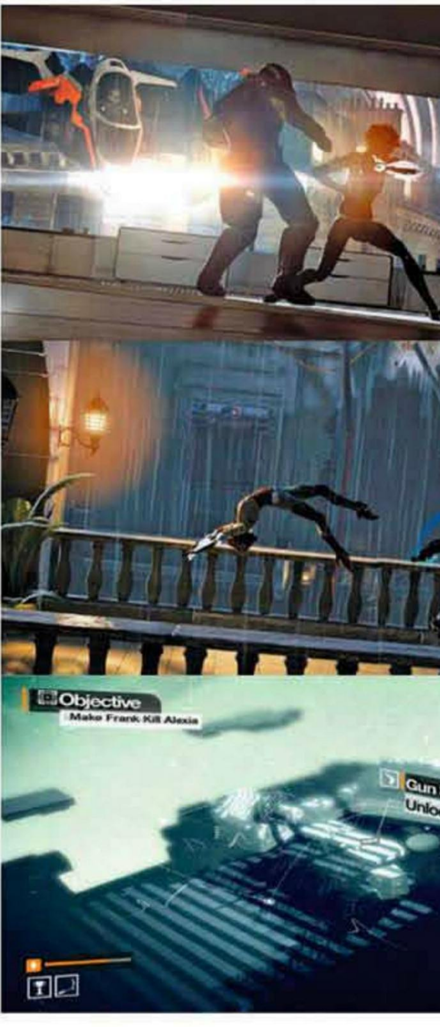
Lost Planet: Extreme Condition
2006 [Multi]

Asura's Wrath
2012 [Multi]

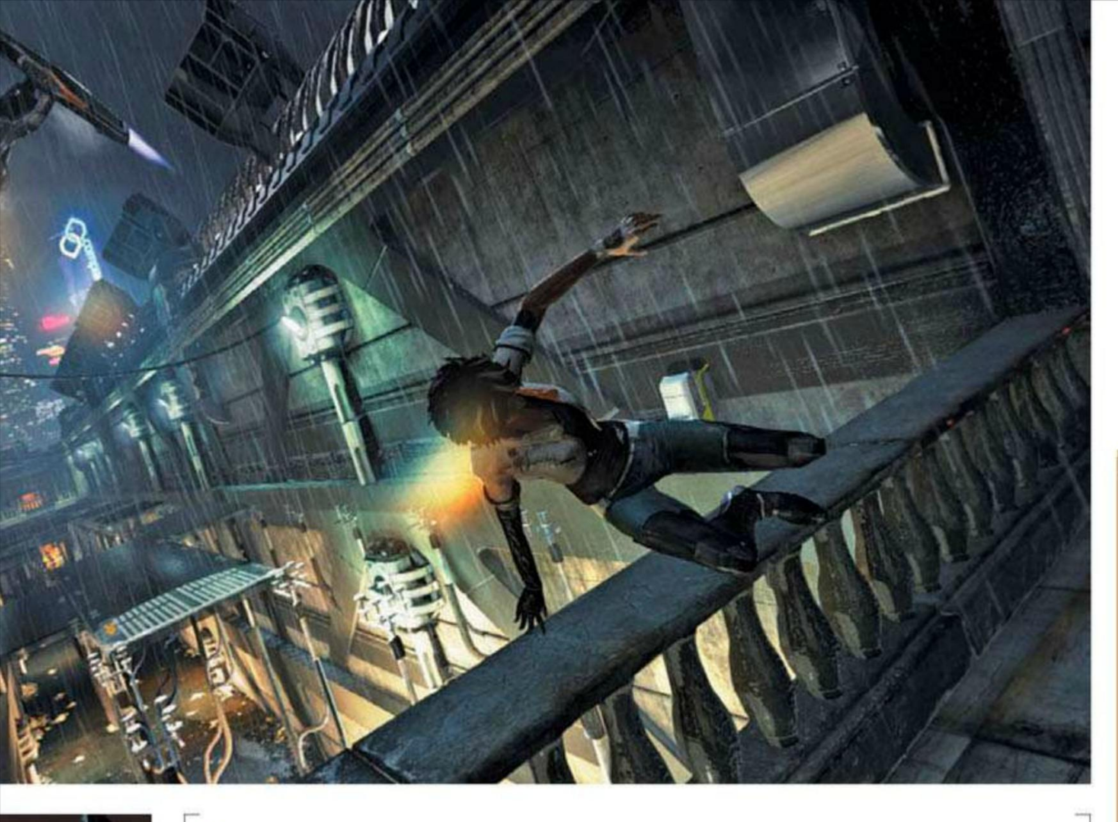
High Point

If *Remember Me* can reach the heights of many of its inspirations, Capcom will have a major hit on its hands. As for Dontnod, success will surely open up the potential for far more scope and opportunity.





■ Right: This is Nilin, the chosen hero for *Remember Me*'s adventure. Early footage seems to suggest the voice acting isn't anything to get excited about...



LIKE THE CORNERS OF MY MIND

BEING THAT MEMORIES are so important to the experience, it would have been ridiculous for Dontnod not to craft a narrative around it. In the developer's vision of the future, everyone has been implanted with a 'Sensation Engine', the device that allows the trading of memories. This technology was built by Memoryeyes, a corporation whose original goal, as ever, was control. Presumably outraged by such a knock against freedom, a rebel group was borne out of the ashes, the Errorists, led by the mentioned Edge, with Nilin among their ranks too. Awful names aside, it's not too far away from something like *Deus Ex*. If *Remember Me* can execute its plot as well as *Human Revolution* did, there's nothing stopping it from being a success.

■ Above: In a similar vein to *Assassin's Creed*, *Remember Me*'s environment is designed to be explored. Just how open or free it will be is yet to be seen, but a semi-open hub much like *Deus Ex* seems likely. Below: It was smart of Dontnod to focus on what makes its game special, but given that, as per usual, combat will take centre stage on more than one occasion, it'll be interesting to see which direction the developer goes.





While Goodrich didn't comment on the state of development for the Wii U version of the game, he admitted that he's still waiting to see Nintendo's killer app for the console.

Medal Of Honor: Warfighter

CONCEPT ■ EA's alternating antidote to *Call Of Duty* returns again, following Tier 1 operatives through a series of missions based on real war scenarios.

Danger Close producer Greg Goodrich details EA's epic shooter

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: EA
Developer: Danger Close
Release: 25 October
Players: 1-12

Developer Profile

Originally founded in 1995 as DreamWorks Interactive, the studio spent its formative years churning out unimaginative licensed pap like it was going out of fashion. *Medal Of Honor* changed its fortunes, enticing EA to acquire the company in 2000. A multitude of *Honor* games followed, along with some more licensed junk.

Developer History

Medal Of Honor **2010 [Multi]**
The Lord Of The Rings: Battle For Middle-earth **2004 [PC]**
Medal Of Honor **1999 [PSone]**
The Lost World: Jurassic Park **1997 [PSone]**

High Point

The original *Medal Of Honor* dutifully balanced historical reverence with blockbuster spectacle. It was a true genre pioneer.

While 2010's *Medal Of Honor* was a competent shooter in its own right, it always felt like a game in two halves. With development split between Danger Close on the single-player campaign and DICE, which handled multiplayer, the game failed to grasp the potential of its heritage.

That's all set to change with the sequel, *Medal Of Honor: Warfighter*. Danger Close is overseeing every aspect of development, now utilising the Frostbite 2 engine, and is determined to pose a legitimate threat to Activision's *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II*. Here, producer Greg Goodrich discusses the challenges faced by the sequel.

It's an incredibly competitive marketplace that, from a consumer perspective, encourages a rivalry between the major first-person shooter franchises. Does this create any pressures internally?
In many cases [us and the *Call Of Duty* developers] have worked together. It's a small industry, and an even smaller genre when it comes to shooters and developers and the games that have come out over the years. [Treyarch studio head] Mark Lamia's a really good friend of mine, many of the guys over there we've worked with, and many of the guys at Danger Close have worked on those games. It's healthy competition. It makes everybody better. It's great for gamers because they continue to push and we continue to push.

There's a sense that the genre is becoming stagnant. In what ways

> "Battlefield is all about the big war, the sledgehammer. We focus on the scalpel"
> GREG GOODRICH DANGER CLOSE

do you see it evolving in the next few years?

I wish I knew. It's funny, too, because for 11 years EA made WWII games. EA made games set in WWII longer than WWII. It's interesting if you look at the conflicts we've been in now for well over a decade; we've been in the longest sustained fight in the history of our nation. There's a lot of stories there, a lot of sacrifice and a lot of tales of service. When you talk to journalists, they talk about the over-saturation of modern military shooters. You never hear that about other genres, right? Zombie games, sports games or RPGs, even though they're rich and ripe with lots of different games. *Plants vs Zombies* is different from *Zombie Smash* and *Zombie Gunship*. Just like how *Call Of Duty* and *Medal Of Honor* are different tonally. *Battlefield* is different than *Medal Of Honor*, in the scale and focus. *Battlefield* is all about the big war, the sledgehammer. We focus on the scalpel. We take a different tone, put players in those boots and tell them a story they can relate to.

Has development been a smoother experience on the sequel compared with the first chapter in the reboot?

We were doing a lot of things during that time. You're talking about a new studio, Danger Close, building the studio, bringing a franchise out of World War II, thinking about assets, the lack of libraries for what we needed. And it was essentially two games in one box: two developers, two engines, two different creative visions. But we were proud of what we accomplished, and that was to reboot the franchise and hold true to the core tenets. Going back to the roots, it was modern, but the themes were the same.

Is there a clearer focus developing *Warfighter*? What has been key to improving on its predecessor?

We've moved technologies from UE3 to Frostbite 2, which inherently creates more challenges. Also we're developing multiplayer. Historically, the franchise has been known for single-player, so we've doubled down and bolstered our team. It's also about finding that space and carving out our own spot in the genre. Do something unique that only *Medal Of Honor* can provide. That's why we've gone 'Blue vs Blue', the global Tier 1, that sense of pride and taking a page from the *FIFA* playbook and allowing players to play for the home team.

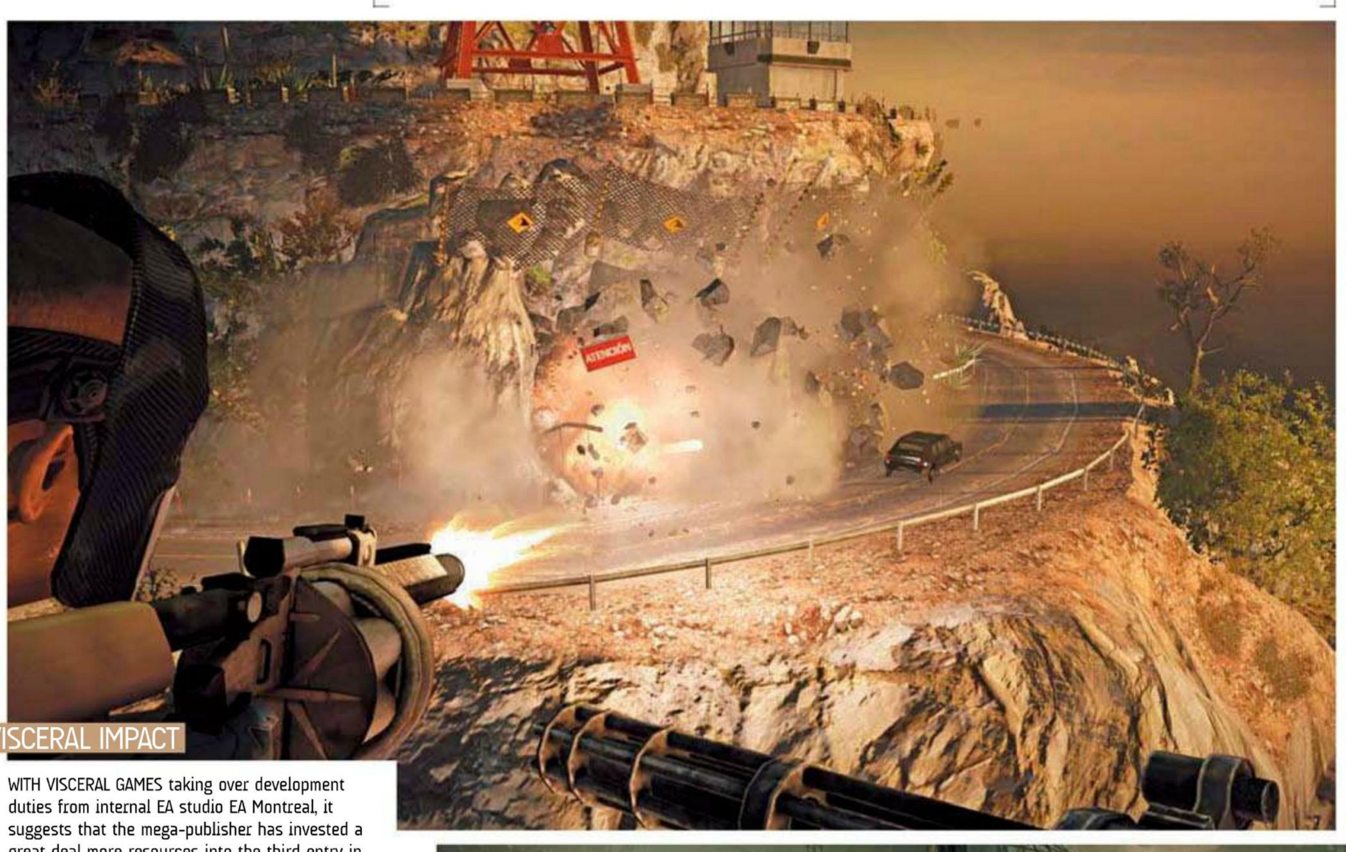


■ EA has pushed DICE's Frostbite 2 engine on the majority of its developers over the last year. Besides *Medal Of Honor: Warfighter*, there's *Army Of Two: The Devil's Cartel* and *Command & Conquer*.

FORGET HONOUR

ONE OF THE key components to *Medal Of Honor: Warfighter*'s multiplayer mode is the ability to have otherwise allied units battling one another for bragging rights. The game will feature 12 Tier 1 forces from around the world, including KSK from Germany, Polish GROM and the UK SAS. Players will also be able to fight for their own region, earning tokens for their country, which contributes to the worldwide standing of that nation. It certainly seems like a step in the right direction for the franchise, but whether players will embrace the *FIFA*-like social features remains to be seen.

Below: Much like DICE, Visceral is utilising the Frostbite 2 engine to make all manner of things explode in glorious ways. Admittedly textures don't quite have the same quality as *Battlefield 3*, but look, boom! Right: The gunplay was always tight in *Army Of Two*, so Visceral has barely touched the mechanics.



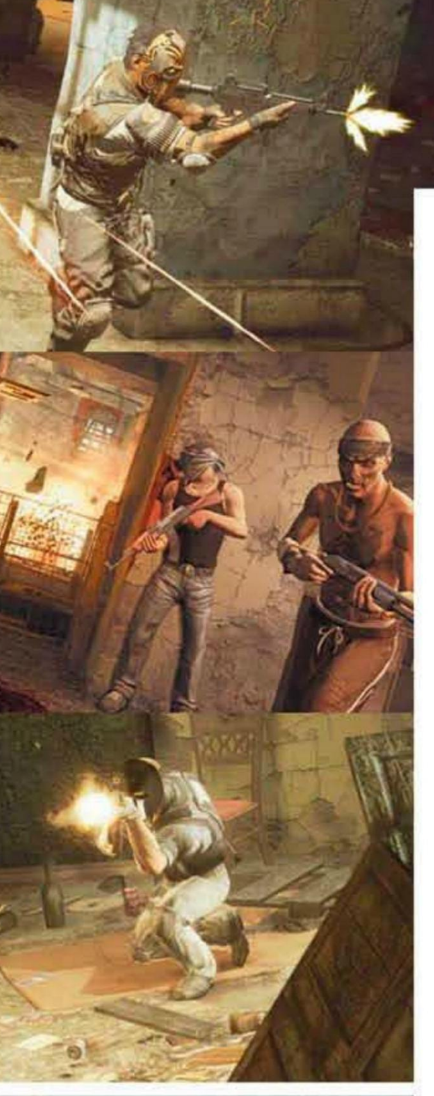
VISCERAL IMPACT

WITH VISCERAL GAMES taking over development duties from internal EA studio EA Montreal, it suggests that the mega-publisher has invested a great deal more resources into the third entry in an attempt to promote the series to EA's top-tier franchises. "I can't be specific," says executive producer Julian Beak when asked whether *Army Of Two: The Devil's Cartel* has a larger budget than its predecessors. "But I would say that EA is fully behind this. It's a big deal for Visceral to make this game, so yeah, it's getting full attention." So can we expect a higher-quality product than the last two games? "I think quality was there before," he explains. "We're just going to bring that up to the highest possible Visceral standard you can imagine."





Above: Alpha and Bravo are the new protagonists in *Army Of Two: The Devil's Cartel*. Although we're not sure anyone will really notice. Right: EA is hoping that Visceral Games' considerable pedigree will give the *Army Of Two* franchise the leg-up that it so desperately needs. Development is being split between Visceral's California and Montreal offices.



Army Of Two: The Devil's Cartel

CONCEPT ■ The third entry in EA's co-op bullet-and-creepy-mask franchise employs *Dead Space* developer Visceral Games to reignite interest in the series.

The devil is in the details

By now we've come to expect a certain amount of 'dudebro' mentality from histrionic third-person shooters. Sure, these experiences will inevitably contain a certain amount of discord between the reality of wanton death and a desire for humour, but in the case of *Army Of Two*, its adolescent, knuckleheaded absurdity hit the wrong side of unpalatable.

It wasn't completely deplorable in that regard; just a sort of numbing crassness that elicits a doleful sigh and a heavy eye roll. EA isn't prepared to give up on the franchise just yet, though, hoping that the third time will be the charm, as it has employed Visceral Games to handle the new instalment and bring a little gravity to the proceedings.

"It's not that the humour isn't going to be there; it's just going to be a little more mature," notes executive producer Julian Beak. "There are parts of the previous games we don't want to lose in terms of the narrative. It was fun. You could sit down and not have to take it super seriously. It's very similar in the way that it's an action blockbuster – you're just having fun with it. But some of the humour is going to grow up. Certainly, I've been asked a lot of questions about whether it's going to be gritty, tragic and depressing, and I can say no. Don't worry about it. The goal is to have everything be blockbuster fun."

Beak's sentiments are certainly reflected in one of the game's more erratic missions. New duo Alpha and Bravo make their way through a dilapidated warehouse before encountering a group of Mexican cartel. While a firefight inevitably ensues, it's the moment-to-moment choices the player makes that maintain a strong resonance with the action. As the two get separated, one must cover the other from afar, before the pair calculate a way to reunite and exit to the next portion of the stage. For Visceral, the key to evolving the series was improving immersion and engaging players beyond the immediate carnage.

"The whole Visceral thing is about it being a personal story," Beak explains in a quick breather from the action. "You're emotionally engaged not only in what's going on in the story but what's going on in the moment. If a guy is coming at me with a knife, what does that mean to me? How is my partner reacting to that? And how am I going to react to that as my character?"

/// It was also fundamentally important to Visceral that the story featured more complex heroes at its core. Alpha and Bravo will be fighting for survival in the midst of a drug war, but there is a personal factor that influences their decisions through the game.

"The story is not some abstract geopolitical thriller," laughs Beak. "It's a very specific drama and blockbuster based around what's happening to you. You're holding on to your survival in the heart of the Mexican drug wars. You haven't gone down there to fix the problem; you've gone down there to do a mission and it's falling apart and you'll be lucky to survive."

Thankfully, you don't have to rely on luck to succeed through the main campaign. Joining the increasingly prevalent EA trend, Visceral is utilising the Frostbite 2 engine for *The Devil's Cartel*. But instead of embellishing the scenery with photorealistic textures, the studio has taken a more absurd approach to the tech. Overkill mode, for instance, enables players to slow time and annihilate enemies with explosive ammunition. When you're equipped with unlimited ammo and no reloading, each bullet detaches limbs and reduces the environment to rubble.

> "There's a bunch of things in the previous games that were fantastic, and we're bringing those forward"
>
> JULIAN BEAK VISCERAL GAMES

You could accuse this mechanic of being another example of the franchise pushing a tonal juxtaposition to an uncomfortable extreme, but there's no denying the instant gratification and raw vigour of the mode. "For Visceral, the goal is to make all of the action intense and right close to you," enthuses Beak. "It's being very aggressive about making sure that what you're experiencing is broadly appealing."

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US/Canada
Publisher: EA
Developer: Visceral Games
Release: March 2013
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Previously known as EA Redwood Shores, the studio underwent a rebranding in 2009 and emerged as Visceral Games. Having worked on a multitude of franchises old and new, from *Agent Under Fire*, through *The Godfather* and on to more recent hits *Dante's Inferno* and *Dead Space 2*, it has become a cornerstone of EA's internal development arm.

Developer History

Dead Space 2 **2011 [Multi]**
Dante's Inferno **2010 [Multi]**
The Godfather: The Game **2006 [Multi]**
The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King **2003 [Multi]**

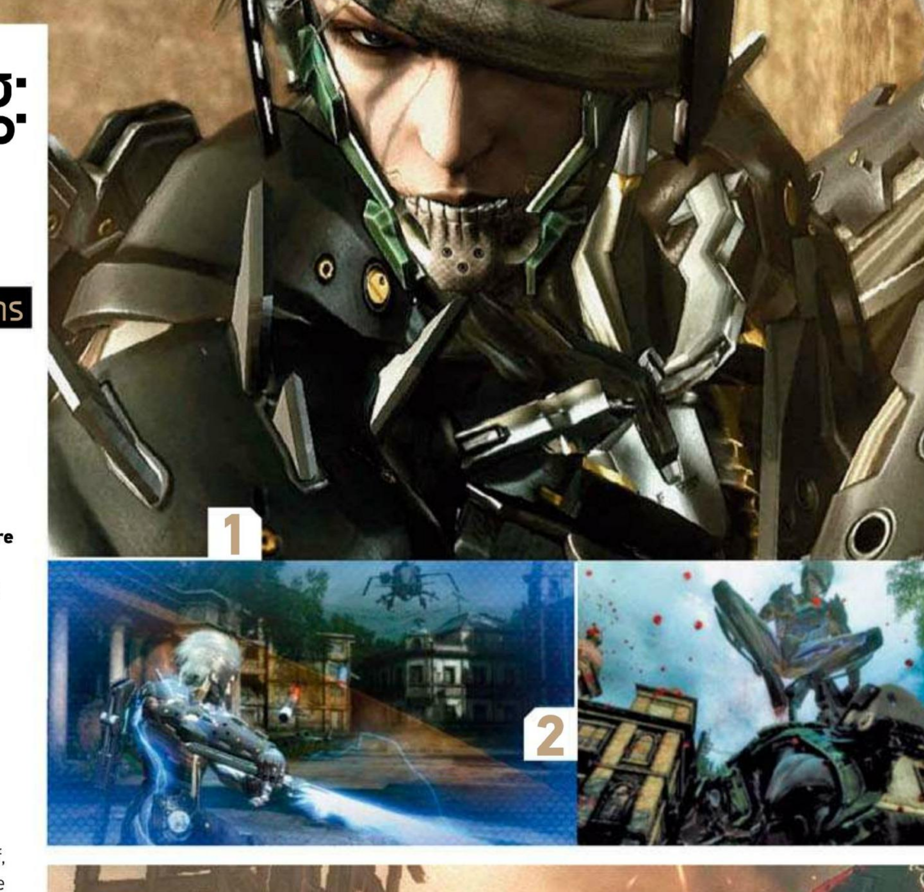
High Point

Dead Space 2 not only outclassed its predecessor but also proved to be a rollercoaster of nerve-shredding chills and exhilarating action.

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

CONCEPT ■ *Metal Gear Solid* meets *Bayonetta* – on paper an odd clash of genres; in action one of the most tantalising design briefs we can think of.

Creative producer Yuji Korekado explains why Platinum's a cut above the rest



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Platinum Games
Release: 21 February 2013
Players: 1

Yuji Korekado Profile

Yuji Korekado has been a long-standing member of the Kojima Productions team, having worked there since *Metal Gear Solid 2*. In the past, he has held the title of lead programmer at the studio's programming unit, but when previous producer Shigenobu Matsuyama stepped down from *Rising* last year, Korekado replaced him as creative producer.

Yuji Korekado History

Zone Of The Enders HD Collection **2012 [Multi]**
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater **2004 [PS2]**
Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes **2004 [GC]**
Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons Of Liberty **2001 [PS2]**

High Point

It's a toss-up between *Metal Gear Solid 4* and *Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence*. The latter takes it, though – the newly controllable camera truly changed the game for the better.

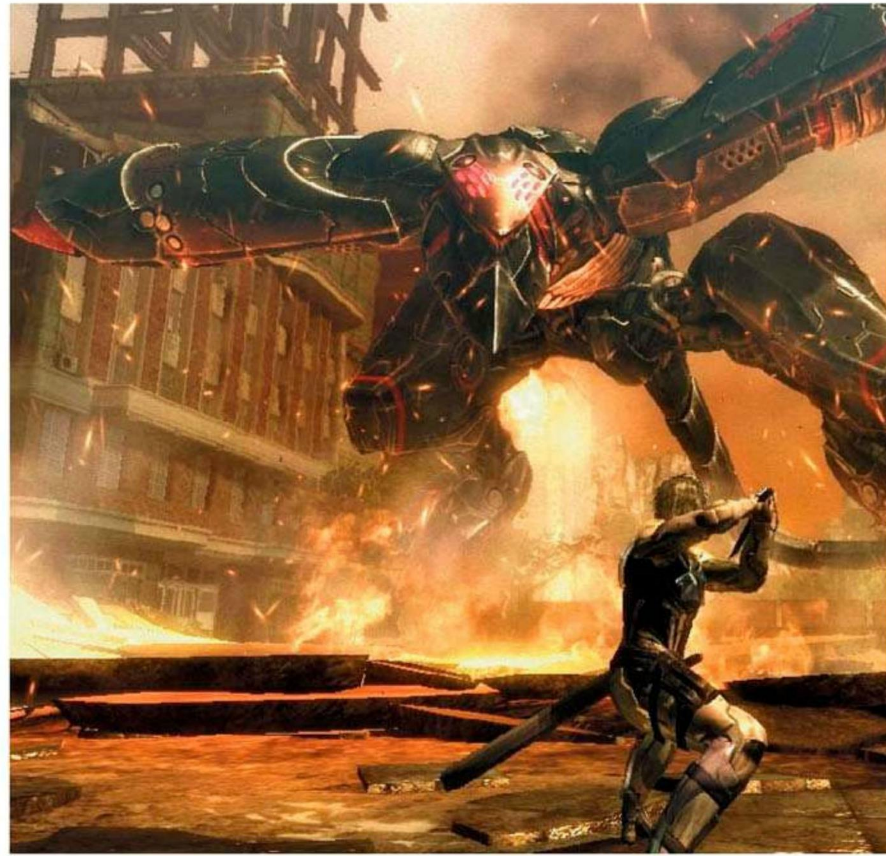
Although the core 'zan-datsu' gameplay of *Metal Gear Rising* has remained consistent across the change in developers, it's difficult to repress the feeling that the game we were to get from Kojima Productions would have nothing on the flashy sambuca shot of a game that's coming from Platinum. We're not the only ones who think so.

"We had several elements of the game, but we didn't have a core route – the very specific game that would be the core of the experience," says creative producer Yuji Korekado of *Rising* while under the rudderless direction of Kojima Productions. "When only the staff of Kojima Productions was working on *Rising*, we had this feeling of, 'Well, if it's a *Metal Gear* game it has to be like this.' However, when we started working with Platinum, they had revolutionary ideas that we would never have been able to think of."

It's thanks to this input that Raiden's adventure is less a straightforward sword-wielding beat-'em-up, and more the kind of free-flowing adrenaline shot that we've experienced in titles like *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish*. It's fast, hyper-violent, and more than a bit silly, taking *Metal Gear* in a welcome new direction. "I believe that collaboration is truly bringing new and good things," says Korekado, and it's difficult to disagree.

1 KENSEI

"IT WAS Kojima who said, 'One of the core features of this game is the katana. It's a sword game, so it has to be a Japanese developer,'" explains Korekado, "'A Japanese developer will know how to handle a katana.'" Platinum has certainly brought something to the table in this regard. Blade mode allows the player to slow time, using flicks of the analogue to unleash slashes across both humans and scenery. They're sliced with a satisfying chunk of sound design akin to a hot blade cutting through ice. "*Metal Gear Rising* is a game that, just by touching it, feels good," Korekado says.







2 "WE CAN REBUILD HIM…"

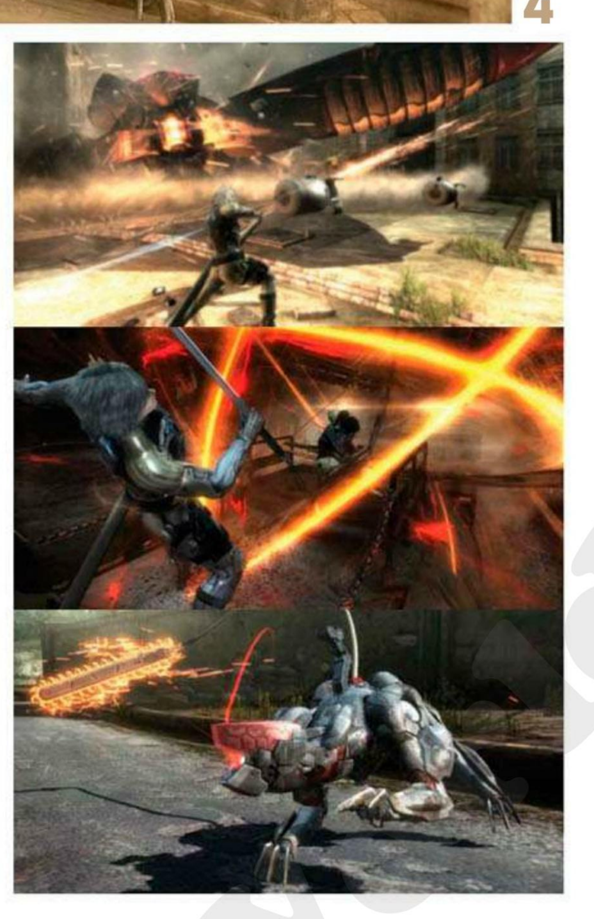
IN HIS first starring role since his escapades aboard Big Shell, *Metal Gear Rising* sees Raiden nine years on from the events of *MGS4*. He's defeated near the start by an unknown PMC, leaving him critically wounded and then once again rebuilt with a more powerful cyborg exterior. According to Korekado, the connection to past games is evident: "*Metal Gear Rising* takes off in a world where [the Patriots were stopped], and we're looking at the results of what happened – it is completely connected to events in previous titles. There are elements that only fans of *Metal Gear* will notice."

3 ARSENAL GEAR

RAIDEN'S ABILITIES aren't limited to slicing watermelons. He has a kick that causes a blade to extend from his leg, for example, and a range of secondary weapons and combos to keep things interesting. He'll also be able to use weaponry such as rocket launchers, the game slipping from a brawler into an over-the-shoulder shooter when such a weapon is wielded. It's not on par with *Vanquish*, such weapons acting more as power-ups than additions to your arsenal, but they add welcome variety to the flurries of light and strong swipes.

"When we started working together with Platinum, they had these revolutionary ideas that we probably would never have been able to think of"

YUJI KOREKADO, KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS



4 UP TO 11

PAST ENTRIES have featured mechs, psychokinetic ghouls and Inuit shaman with F-16 weaponry, but even that feels restrained compared to this. You'll hack apart helicopters in mid-air, lasso Gekkos, and fight alongside cyborg Pumas. "In *MGS4*, Raiden was only in cut-scenes, making all of these cool movements," says Korekado. "With *Rising*, we wanted the player to do all of those." Players will be able to choose which route they take through levels, and engage in some light stealth.

5 RISING ABOVE IT ALL

THE LACK of an evade is a glaring omission. In combat, Raiden can jump or run but can't elegantly leap out the way of incoming attacks, his main form of defence coming in the form of a parry. *Rising* has also shown itself to be linear, with the risk of repetition if Platinum doesn't mix things up. Thankfully, what we've seen so far – an anarchic combination of over-the-top combat and tongue-in-cheek silliness – looks to be doing just that.



■ Below: *Tearaway* is part of Sony's big strategy to give Vita the second chance the handheld so richly deserves.

Tearaway

CONCEPT ■ Chase and retrieve a message through a paper world that you interact directly with by touching, poking, sweeping and tapping.

Could Tearaway be the runaway success that Sony needs it to be?

It's typically Media Molecule that you hear the genesis of *Tearaway* came about as a result of one developer wanting to be able to see their fingers 'popping up' through the screen of the PS Vita. From that seed comes the studio's first non-*LittleBigPlanet* game: a tale of a character named Iota, living in a world made of paper, on a mission to retrieve a message for you, the player. 'Twee' just about begins to cover it.

But this is Media Molecule, a studio known for its unfettered approach to creative urges, so *Tearaway* is very much a game in that vein. From the original thought of having your fingers 'come through' the screen, we now have gameplay of a tactile nature not seen before on Vita. Reach to the back touchpad, for example, and poke at it. Your fingers appear in the game world, piercing the paper from which it is made and interacting with the characters in it. Or maybe you need to cut out an item – simply trace a finger along the touch screen in the shape required. It's a simple effect, but it brings a greater level of attachment to what's going on.

■ Below: While the developers claim the controls won't be crowbarred in, we can't help but feel some of them might just feel that way.

This isn't a case of shoehorning in as many daft little features as possible in order to tick some boxes on the Vita control scheme list, though. Media Molecule has approached development in a free-form, interesting way that results in innovative and sometimes unique interactions for the player. It's one of the few times a developer has used the word 'visceral' to describe something about a game and we haven't felt the need to shudder.

Tearaway plays like any other third-person adventure game you might have come across, at least until the extra control elements are encountered. You might need to replace the skin of an elk, for example, in a scene nowhere near as gruesome as it might sound. By taking a photograph with the Vita's rear camera, a skin of sorts is created for the creature and it can go on its happy little way, now reskinned. Just try not to make it too obscene.

And while you are playing the game, it is paying attention to what you do. *Tearaway* notes what quests you decide to play and how you play them; how you customise your character and the world around them. What purpose does this serve? All of the purpose, it turns out: the message that Iota and the player are chasing after will apply directly to how the player played. Everything you do, in the end, matters.

"We've had a game jam style of development where we've really played with what we can do with the Vita"

REX CROWLE MEDIA MOLECULE

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS Vita
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Media Molecule
Release: Q1 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Media Molecule is not an old studio with a storied history, but its brief time making games as a team has seen two defining moments in the history of a console, along with numerous helping hands afforded to teams running with its concepts. The *LittleBigPlanet* series is one that won't be forgotten soon.

Developer History

LittleBigPlanet Karting **2012 [PS3]**
LittleBigPlanet Vita **2012 [Vita]**
LittleBigPlanet 2 **2011 [PS3]**
LittleBigPlanet **2008 [PS3]**

High Point

While the original brought Play, Create, Share to the masses, it was *LittleBigPlanet 2* that really showed us what the idea could do. And it's still yet to be bettered.



CRYSTAL DYNAMICS ON THE RAPE CONTROVERSY

"SITUATIONS LIKE that do kind of knock you, get your head spinning," says Stewart of the fallout over a comment made by executive producer Ron Rosenberg, suggesting that Lara will be a victim of rape. "It's unfortunate that happened. But we always knew from day one, the decision we made to re-imagine Lara in an M-rated space, there were going to be challenges, story and narrative that we knew were going to be challenging to bring to the forefront."

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Release: 5 March 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Since 2006 with *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Crystal Dynamics has become the sole custodian of the *Tomb Raider* series. But before the adventures of Ms Croft occupied its time, the studio began life developing for the ill-fated 3DO before finding success with the *Legacy Of Kain* and *Gex* franchises.

Developer History

Lara Croft And The Guardian Of Light **2010 [Multi]**
Project Snowblind **2005 [Multi]**
Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver **1999 [Multi]**
Gex **1994 [Multi]**

High Point

It runs out of steam halfway through, but *Soul Reaver* is still a solid third-person adventure that has left its mark on the genre and is ripe for a return.



THE NEW WORLD

■ WITH A sprawling open-world archipelago to investigate, this is the most ambitious *Tomb Raider* in both scale and character. Ultimately for Crystal Dynamics, it's an opportunity for the studio to tell the definitive Lara Croft story. "I think, for anybody who gives it an opportunity, it's still inherently Lara Croft, still *Tomb Raider*," states Stewart. "[We're hoping] with our new hub system you might get people who think, 'I now am an explorer! I'm now doing all the things I was meant to be doing before.'"

HUNT TO EAT

■ LARA'S INTERACTIONS with native wildlife in the reboot will extend beyond doing her best to make them extinct. Using a bow and arrow that players can craft, Lara must hunt to survive, eating any animals she manages to ensnare. "Once we'd made certain decisions like with survival," explains Stewart, "you kind of put yourself on a [certain] track where you say we're no longer [for children]."

Tomb Raider

CONCEPT ■ A Lara Croft origin story wherein the intrepid explorer is marooned on a tropical island and uses her wits to survive the tempestuous landscape and feral natives.

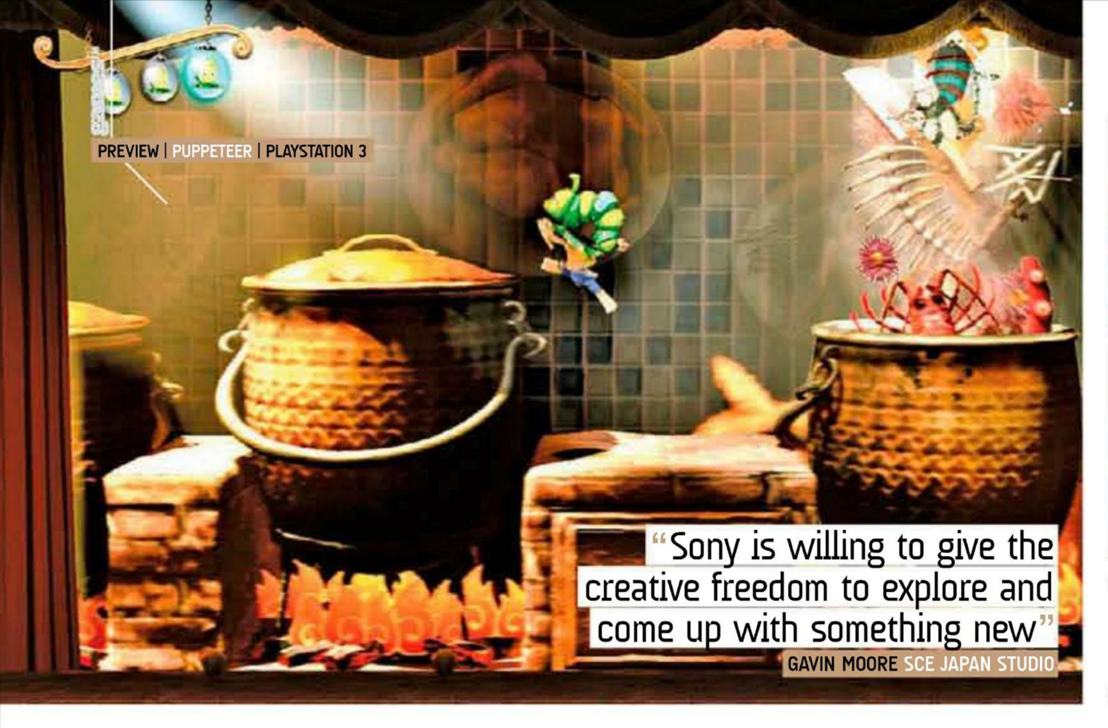
Back to the future

Lara Croft has found herself in a precarious predicament: reinvention. She's currently hanging vertically from some poorly lit cave, desperately struggling to escape her bindings. If she swings too far one way then the enduring icon of videogame feminism will continue to be squandered in progressively more ridiculous adventures; swing too far the other and she'll become indissolubly unrecognisable.

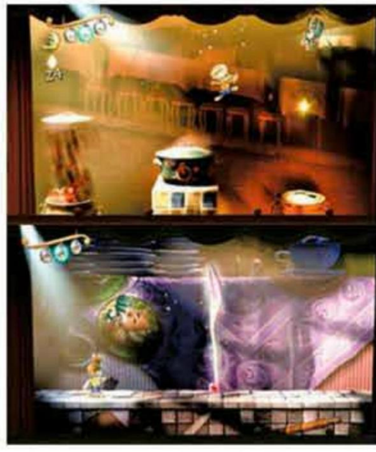
This balance has perhaps been the greatest challenge of the reboot for Crystal Dynamics, retaining the essential component parts within a universe starker than its predecessors. "It's very important to us to spend time on the front end to create a game that's familiar yet different," says global brand manager Karl Stewart. "People need to feel like it's Lara Croft, but the Lara Croft of today. It's important that people don't finish the game and still not believe that it's Lara, that it's just somebody else. Just a name."

It no doubt helps that the story is set years before the events of the other games, where Lara is at the end of her carefree teenage years. She's a malleable protagonist, therefore, enabling the studio to introduce numerous gameplay facets synonymous with the hero, while also twisting the formula to add fresh elements.

"We look at it now and think, 16 years later, there's very few games that have the opportunity to re-imagine themselves, and bring along the people who remember playing it day one," Stewart delightedly states. "It really excites us. We're very different."



"Sony is willing to give the creative freedom to explore and come up with something new"
GAVIN MOORE SCE JAPAN STUDIO



Above: "I'm a great lover of platform gaming, from way back," says Moore. "I wanted to incorporate that sense of language. Everybody knows that you run and jump. It's our language; like the film language of camera. It's our gaming language."

Puppeteer

CONCEPT It looks like *LittleBigPlanet*, but it's not. This is an old-school platformer that plays out on a constantly shifting stage. Oh, and your hamburger head can create trampoline sandwiches.

Heads will roll in this fine pantomime

It's always been something of a gaming cliché – parents demanding that their children lay down their joypads and get outside for some fresh air. Now those children have grown up, and there seems to have been something of a role reversal – in the case of Sony Japan game director Gavin Moore, at least.

"*Puppeteer* was an idea conceived to reawaken my son's imagination," says the British expatriate. "Games today are so high-quality and the technology is awesome, but the kids have got used to it. There was a point when my son played one of these games for 30 seconds and then decided he was going outside to play. As a dad, that's great, but as a game creator I thought, 'Well, that's kind of shocking! He shouldn't be going outside to play; he should be inside playing games!' When I was a kid, we played games and wouldn't want to leave our bedrooms."

The result of this thinking is *Puppeteer*, one of Sony's many imaginative Gamescom reveals, which combines old-school platforming with a world as unpredictable and joy-packed as any of Mario's.

The game plays out within the borders of a theatre stage, the images in its frame constantly shifting as you progress through the world. Stages and sets slam into place, old environments pushed into the background as new ones replace them. It's a deliriously inventive backdrop, transforming before your eyes every ten to fifteen minutes.

"I wanted to make something that would move, and something that would engross the player," says Moore. "As a game creator who wanted to do this for his son, I could keep him in his seat not knowing what's coming next."

The story within this world is no less erratic. You play as the young Kutaro, a boy who's had the unfortunate one-two punch of being turned into a puppet and then having his head bitten off by the tyrannical Moon Bear King. Kutaro can find and 'wear' new heads located around the world, which imbue him with new powers. Wearing a hamburger upon his shoulders, for instance, allows Kutaro to turn background objects into trampoline-like sandwiches, while a spider head enables him to access hidden areas of the game world.

Puppeteer's other central mechanic comes in the form of a pair of scissors named Calibrus. Controlled using the right analogue stick, these enable Kutaro to snip enemies in two and slice through flaps of material to reach higher areas, or, at one point, cut upwards through a colony of cloth bats to propel himself into the air.

It's all looking very imaginative – a clash of Eastern and Western design that harks back to a time when imagination presided over graphical fidelity or technological power. "It's going to give people a lot of different experiences," says Moore. "It's all about the gameplay experience, and ensuring it's novel. Sony is willing to give us creative freedom to explore that and come up with something new."



Above: *Puppeteer* plays out in front of an audience who will cheer and boo your actions. Stay idle for a while and they'll start whispering and coughing.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sony
Developer: SCE Japan Studio
Release: 2013
Players: 1-TBA

Gavin Moore Profile

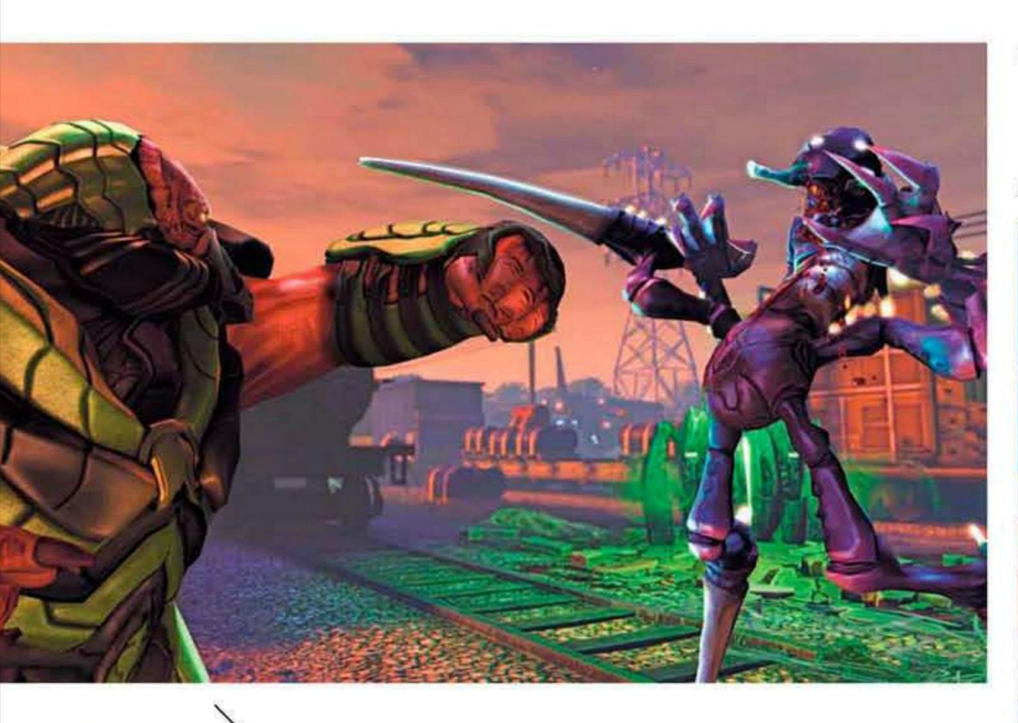
Gavin Moore has been in the games industry since the early Nineties, when he started out working as an artist at Mindscape. Over the years he's worked at a number of different companies as an animator and lead artist, which has clearly fed into the look and style of *Puppeteer*. He moved to Sony in 1998, and then to Sony Japan in 2003, where he has been since.

Gavin Moore History

Siren **2003 [PS2]**
This Is Football 2 **2000 [PSone]**
Warhammer: Shadow Of The Horned Rat **1996 [Multi]**
Out To Lunch **1993 [Multi]**

High Point

Moore's most prominent work was done on Sony's foray into the open-world crime spree simulator *The Getaway*, released in 2002.



Left: We've seen little of the base-building and interception gameplay, but given that *Civilization* dev Firaxis is on the job, we expect this strategic side of the game to be just as tightly designed – and just as cruel – as its tactical aspects. Below: Firaxis will be paying attention to multiplayer metrics post-launch, and will make on-the-fly point cost changes according to how players play.



XCOM: Enemy Unknown

CONCEPT The core *XCOM* gameplay remains unwaveringly difficult in this modernised take on the turn-based tactics and strategy title.

One remake that won't be excommunicated by its fans

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Firaxis Games
Release: 12 October 2012
Players: 1-2

Proper Remake Profile

It's unfortunate, but today a modernised take on a classic IP usually means something far removed from the original – like *Shadowrun* becoming a multiplayer arena shooter, or *Syndicate* eschewing its top-down tactics for first-person action. It's not often we get a bona fide, true-to-the-original sequel, but it does happen.

Proper Remake History

Wasteland 2
2013 [PC]

Silent Hill: Shattered Memories
2009 [Wii]

Bionic Commando Rearmed
2008 [Multi]

Resident Evil
2002 [GC]

High Point

Street Fighter IV refused to shift to 3D arenas or incorporate needless novelties, and focused instead on the pure 2D plane that's always informed the core of the series.

If you're still worried that the upcoming console take on classic *XCOM* is going to dilute the hard-as-nails formula that made the original so challenging, then worry no more. "When we sat down to kick off this project, we did so as very big fans of *XCOM*," assures Firaxis producer Garth DeAngelis. "The turn-based combat, the strategy layer, the fog of war, the destructible environments, the permanent death – we had to bring all these things into the modern version."

XCOM: Enemy Unknown remains a tough and uncompromising strategy title, taking its cues from recent ball-busters like *Dark Souls*. "I think there's a bit of a renaissance with challenge and permanent death – games like *Demon's Souls* are very challenging, and millions of people are buying them," says DeAngelis. "We need to have the challenge there so there's more weight to the success. The ability to rename these soldiers and make a connection with them and tell a story about how they died – that internal narrative is something we had to maintain."

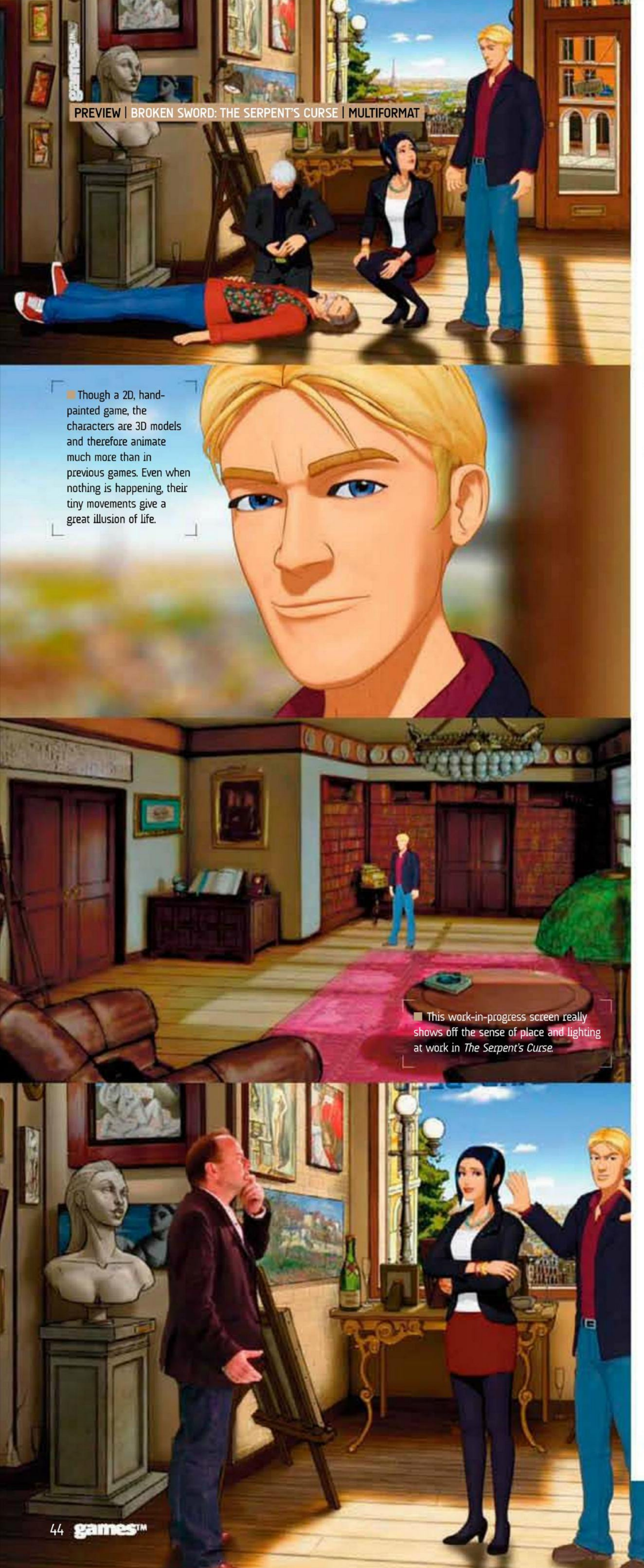
Although the core of the game remains solid, Firaxis has still tweaked the formula, "modernising" it to keep in step with the evolution that game design has undergone over the past 17 years. For instance, the currency of time units and the grid-based map movement have been removed. In their place, Firaxis has introduced a streamlined system of movement and firing that sees players spend turns reloading, engaging in stealth, providing suppressing fire and so forth, in a manner not too dissimilar from Sega's *Valkyria Chronicles*. As such, the combat feels like an ongoing series of tactical decisions, turning the player into an armchair general as they examine the battlefield, select the best movements, and consider the risks.

The newly introduced multiplayer sticks to this strict tactical setup. Players begin with a points pool from which they can purchase any selection of units – alien or human – along with weaponry and inventory. The more powerful a unit is or the better equipped, the more expensive it is. "It's the ultimate toybox," says DeAngelis. "You can build your perfect squad within the budget of that point cost. You're facing off against one other team. It's classic last man standing wins."

The matches replicate the core *XCOM* gameplay, except here a turn is limited to 115 seconds. This forces players to examine the battlefield and make decisions quickly, while constantly weighing the pros and cons of their impact several moves ahead. It's high-speed chess, played out on a board of hulking aliens and high-tech soldiers.

So, for those of you concerned that this is in any way a lesser game than that which has come before, fear no more. Firaxis's game isn't pulling its punches; instead it's delivering a tight, refined and exacting experience where your success is measured in the corpses of your comrades. That's exactly as it should be.

> "It's classic XCOM – players can make dozens of choices. It's different every time they play"
> GARTH DEANGELIS FIRAXIS GAMES



Though a 2D, hand-painted game, the characters are 3D models and therefore animate much more than in previous games. Even when nothing is happening, their tiny movements give a great illusion of life.

This work-in-progress screen really shows off the sense of place and lighting at work in *The Serpent's Curse*.

Broken Sword: The Serpent's Curse

CONCEPT George Stobbart returns in the fifth *Broken Sword* adventure, in familiar 2D, but with a new and unfamiliar antagonist.

George Stobbart is back where he belongs, in the second dimension

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Android, iOS, Mac, PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Revolution Software
Developer: In-house
Release: 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Originally based in Hull but long since relocated to the much nicer surroundings of York, Revolution Software is one of the greatest adventure game specialists in the world and is headed by the ebullient Charles Cecil, who runs the studio single-handedly, growing and shrinking its staff as projects dictate. For *The Serpent's Curse*, the studio is more active than it's been in over a decade.

Developer History

Broken Sword: The Angel Of Death **2006 [PC]**
In Cold Blood **2001 [Multi]**
Beneath A Steel Sky **1994 [Multi]**
Lure Of The Temptress **1992 [Multi]**

High Point

Broken Sword remains *the* Revolution series, but we'll always have a soft spot for cyberpunk adventure *Beneath A Steel Sky*, now long overdue a sequel.

Another Kickstarter project, another adventure game revival. But you won't find us complaining about this one. The *Broken Sword* series is a national treasure and we're more than happy to see a new 2D entry in the series, made with high-definition technology and, more importantly, by the original team that know the characters so well. Charles Cecil, head of Revolution and designer of the series so far, discusses the revival.

Why have you decided to revisit *Broken Sword* after nearly six years away?

I think it was plain that from the late Nineties through to about three years ago, the perceived wisdom was that the adventure was commercially unfeasible. *Broken Sword* got a new lease of life when we released a director's cut of the first game on the Wii and DS through Ubisoft and then self-published *Broken Sword: Director's Cut* and *Broken Sword: The Smoking Mirror* on handheld. We were overwhelmed by how well received they were. The two games sold 500,000 on iOS in 2011, and this proved to us that there was a new audience for adventures, and it also provided us with the money that then allowed us to start writing this new *Broken Sword* game.

Why the return to 2D? Were the 3D games a mistake?

We moved to 3D because we needed to write a game that a publisher would fund and that a retailer would ultimately decide to stock. We were also aiming primarily for console because at that time it was considered by publishers that the PC was dying, and that is something that sounds laughable now. The whole move to 3D was just the commercial reality of the time. The 3D versions of the games felt quite different, but

> "In Broken Sword, we explore what secrets the Gnostics held and why the Church should feel so threatened"
> CHARLES CECIL REVOLUTION SOFTWARE

a lot of people loved them and there is a great deal of loyalty to all four games. So we have absolutely no regrets. But, going forward, we are certainly moving back towards a 2D game and the reaction we have had is very positive about it.

So what can we expect from *The Serpent's Curse*?

The game is very much point-and-click as well as slide-and-tap, just like the revamped *Broken Sword* games that we've put out recently. But, as always, we do plan to innovate in the genre and make the game very special. I don't want to give too much away this early, but one element that is currently being explored is the manipulation and combining of knowledge, so the player must connect threads of knowledge in order to draw logical conclusions, which then allow them to proceed.

Can you give us an idea of what the plot will involve this time?

Sure. I'm more than happy to talk about the historical elements that, in the story, resonate into the present day. A lot of it revolves around a subject that I find fascinating, which is the Gnostic heretics – a group of early Christians who were loathed and feared by the orthodox church, and who, ultimately, were brutally suppressed and then massacred. The story starts with Jesus' disciples, who were split between orthodox and Gnostic. I'll explain: the Gnostics had special knowledge that Jesus taught only them, followed by brutal suppression, through to the Albigensian Crusades in the 13th Century, in which the Pope and the King of France massacred hundreds of thousands of innocents, after which the Dominican Order was set up to finally destroy any remaining Gnostics. In *Broken Sword*, we explore what secrets the Gnostics held and why the Church should feel so threatened. We also explore the role, according to Gnostic gospels, of Lucifer – the bringer of light, Lux Ferre. These are themes that I believe are profoundly significant to how religion evolved, which makes them important and fascinating.

Why no Knights Templar?

We were largely responsible for bringing the Knights Templar to the public consciousness. Many of our fans are sure that Dan Brown must have played *Broken Sword* and, in writing *The Da Vinci Code*, was inspired by the story, the characters and the settings. But the problem is we then saw a slew of Knights Templar books and films, and so the subject matter, as great as it is, has become clichéd. Our objective is, rather than looking back, to look forward to create the next zeitgeist, and that is what we're hoping to do here.



Though using a lot of modern tech, these WIP screens show just how important the human hand remains to *Broken Sword*.

GETTING THE BAND BACK TOGETHER

FOR *THE Serpent's Curse*, Cecil has amassed a team of artists from the likes of Disney and DreamWorks but has also re-recruited some of the classic Revolution employees who know *Broken Sword* best. "It's been fantastic," he says of working with old friends again. "Throughout our history, we have had some really talented staff and many say that they loved their time at Revolution. A number of these people chose to work on a freelance basis, and it's great to be able to work with them again, both from a professional and a personal perspective. There's a really great camaraderie amongst the whole team. Everyone is here because they love adventures and *Broken Sword* in particular."

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

HORN

Format: Android, iOS
Publisher: Zynga
Developer: Phosphor Games
ETA: November



HORN PRACTICALLY epitomises the convergence of creativity and power going on in the mobile market right now. It may look like a *Fable* clone on the surface, but the premise, which sees a blacksmith fight monsters he later discovers are his fellow citizens transformed by a curse, is original and has the potential to turn the game into something more thoughtful than a ten-hour hack-and-slash.

ANIMAL CROSSING

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
ETA: March 2013



A FEW new details about the next *Animal Crossing* have trickled through, including the fact that a garden centre and thrift store will feature in addition to a shoe shop, shopping mall and 24-hour museum, presumably bringing the game closer to the Wii version in nature. Tom Nook will also take on an expanded role, running a 'raccoon housing project', though we're not entirely sure what that means.

ORGARHYTHM

Format: Android, PS Vita
Publisher: Xseed Games
Developer: Acquire
ETA: November



PREVIOUSLY COVERED in **games™**'s rhythm-action feature in issue 124, this unique mix of *Pikmin*-style strategy and music game was originally announced as a Vita exclusive but is now also in development for Tegra-enhanced Android devices, using the improved resolution to display visuals exactly as they appear on the Vita. This, we imagine, will bring it to a much wider audience than before.

SUMIONI: DEMON ARTS

Format: Android, PS Vita
Publisher: Acquire
Developer: In-house
ETA: October



ANOTHER PLAYSTATION Vita game jumping to Android, this one is an absolutely beautiful-looking 2D platform game that uses touch screen brush strokes to fill in the platforms. The title comes from the Japanese Sumi – a form of ink-based calligraphy – and Oni – the word for demon – the meaning of which is clear through every screen of this gorgeous game.

SACRED CITADEL

Format: PC, PS3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Southend Interactive
ETA: Early 2013



WHILE GERMAN RPG fans patiently wait for news on the MIA *Sacred 3*, they can pass the time with this spin-off game developed by the team behind *ilomilo*. Though it does feature RPG elements, *Sacred Citadel* is more of a side-scrolling hack-and-slash game with similarities to *Golden Axe*, including mountable beasts. The game features three-player co-op and will be exclusive to download formats.

SIR, YOU ARE BEING HUNTED

Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: Big Robot
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



A FIRST-PERSON shooter with a difference, *Sir, You Are Being Hunted* takes place in a randomly generated English countryside and sees you being hunted down by a group of posh robots and their mechanical hounds. It's essentially a survival horror game with hints of *Fallout 3*, but with a very silly yet dark sense of humour. Its random generator has been calibrated to maintain a high level of Englishness.

RUNNER 2: FUTURE LEGEND OF RHYTHM ALIEN

Format: PS3, Wii U, Xbox 360
Publisher: Gaijin Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: December



THIS SEQUEL to WiiWare title *Bit.Trip Runner* ditches the *Bit.Trip* label and turns its back on the original's faux retro aesthetic. What's left is what made the first *Runner* so irresistible: simple gameplay combined with an extremely harsh but fair difficulty level. A host of new characters will join Commander Video, while new chiptune composer Disasterpeace supplies the sublime sounds.

DEMON'S SCORE

Format: Android, iOS
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: iNiS
ETA: October



WHILE INIS'S other game, *Eden To Greeeen*, is a departure from the developer's usual output of rhythm-action games, *Demon's Score* is a return. A rather ingenious combination of lightgun shooter and rhythm-action, it looks perfect for touch-screen devices but should also scale up to TV sets rather nicely, allowing observers to enjoy watching what is sure to be an entertaining arcade experience.



DELAYED – Wii U

Rumours of production problems surrounding the Wii U GamePad suggest Nintendo is struggling to hit its November launch and that the European release may be postponed until December.



CANCELLED – InSane

THQ has cancelled this horror game collaboration with Guillermo Del Toro, with the rights reverting back to the Hollywood director. Here's hoping he can still get it made somehow.

BLAZBLUE: CHRONO PHANTASMA

Format: **Arcade, PlayStation 3**
Publisher: **Arc System Works**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **December**



CURRENTLY ON location test in Japanese arcades and heading to PlayStation 3 in the new year, this new *BlazBlue* game looks like an incremental update more than anything else. It features just three new characters, as well as a new move called Overdrive. Intended to be a counter to Break Burst, Overdrives grant more power and stronger super attacks for a short period of time.

YAKUZA 5

Format: **PlayStation 3**
Publisher: **Sega**
Developer: **Yakuza Studio**
ETA: **December**



SEGA'S AMBITIOUS sequel isn't content to just use a new engine or to feature five completely separate locations and five playable characters. No, Sega won't rest until *Yakuza 5* features more content than practically every other game. In fact, it even has other games inside. Namco's rhythm-action coin-op *Taiko Drum Master* will feature in fully playable form, including three songs. Beat that, *GTA V*!

NI-OH

Format: **PlayStation 3**
Publisher: **Tecmo Koei**
Developer: **Team Ninja**
ETA: **2013**



FIRST ANNOUNCED back in 2004, *Ni-Oh* was intended to adapt an unfinished Akira Kurosawa screenplay at the same time as Kurosawa's son, Hisao, completed the film. The latter never materialised but the game still might. Tecmo Koei has handed the reins to Team Ninja and revealed that the alpha build was recently completed. Can the game still be this good after so many years in development hell?

NAKED WAR

Format: **iPad**
Publisher: **Zee 3**
Developer: **The Pickford Bros**
ETA: **2013**



NAKED WAR, asynchronous multiplayer strategy so far ahead of its time that we gave it 9/10 back in issue 50, is nearing release on its natural home, the iPad. Ste Pickford, one half of The Pickford Bros, tells us that the basic port is complete, with turns running through Game Center, leaving the team to convert the UI. It's still some way off, so enjoy the exclusive screen while you wait.

BLADESLINGER

Format: **Android, iOS**
Publisher: **Luma Arcade**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **November**



THIS STEAMPUNK western action game looks so good that you wouldn't even think it was a mobile game unless you were told. It looks so good, in fact, that this is something mobile owners will want to buy just to show off what their system is capable of. Tegra 3 Android devices enable a number of improvements, including more enemies on screen and, wait for it… ragdoll physics.

VIRTUE'S LAST REWARD

Format: **3DS, PS Vita**
Publisher: **Rising Star Games**
Developer: **Chunsoft**
ETA: **November**



THIS FOLLOW-UP to cult DS adventure *999: Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors* has had us excited ever since the Japanese edition was announced as *Good People Die*, and now that it's confirmed for the UK, our enthusiasm has reached dangerous levels. Like *999*, it puts characters in deadly situations and challenges them with escaping against the odds. Several endings exist, but most will be tragic.

UNDER DEFEAT HD

Format: **PS3, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Rising Star Games**
Developer: **G.rev**
ETA: **October**



ORIGINALLY CREATED for the arcade in 2005 and ported to the Dreamcast in 2006, *Under Defeat* was one of the last commercial titles for Sega's final console, arriving five years after Sega itself had abandoned the system. Lots of gamers missed out on this exemplary shooter as a result, so it's fantastic news that G.rev has lovingly remade it in HD and that Rising Star has picked it up for a UK release.

EDEN TO GREEEEN

Format: **Android**
Publisher: **iNiS**
Developer: **in-house**
ETA: **October**



THOUGH INIS has specialised in rhythm-action in the past, its latest game, *Eden To Greeeen*, explores the tower defence genre. iNiS's take is more tower offence than defence and sees players controlling a bunch of sentient plants as they combat evil bulldozers. The entire game, including its expansions, will be free-to-play, though players will be able to buy more powerful plants if they wish.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

SPY HUNTER

Format: 3DS, PS Vita
Publisher: Warner Bros
Developer: TT Fusion
ETA: Autumn



THIS REBOOT of the 1983 arcade game comes from TT Fusion, a sister studio to Traveller's Tales, and is intended to bring the original gameplay of Midway's transforming car game up to date with a few *Burnout*-style bells and whistles. The developer is promising more forms of customisation and transformation as well as a new aerial drone that provides support fire from above.

KICKBEAT

Format: PS Vita
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Zen Studios
ETA: Autumn



THIS INTRIGUING mix of rhythm-action and fighting, from the team behind *Zen Pinball*, was shown off at Gamescom, specifically demonstrating the way the game manages to do rhythm-action without any abstract prompts like arrows or buttons. A few new tracks were revealed, including tunes from Rob Zombie, Marilyn Manson and Pendulum. It's like *The Matrix*'s soundtrack come to life.

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW – MIRROR OF FATE

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Konami
Developer: MercurySteam
ETA: Early 2013



AN EXCITING proposition for fans of *Castlevania* canon, *Mirror Of Fate* bridges the gap between 2010's *Lords Of Shadow* and the classic series, and heralds the return of favourite characters Simon and Trevor Belmont, plus Alucard, in playable form. *Mirror Of Fate* felt a little clunky when we played it at the start of this year, but there's still time for MercurySteam to add polish.

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS DECLASSIFIED

Format: PS Vita
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Nihilistic Software
ETA: November



WHILE SONY made a number of fantastic PS Vita announcements at Gamescom, doing much to boost the profile of the ailing handheld, we get the feeling that the fate of Vita lies entirely in the hands of *Call Of Duty*. The twin-sticked system is crying out for a console-style FPS, and *Black Ops Declassified* looks authentic enough, complete with eight-player online modes, to do the business.

ASSASSIN'S CREED III: LIBERATION

Format: PS Vita
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Sofia
ETA: November



AN IMPRESSIVE prequel to *Assassin's Creed III*, *Liberation* puts you in the role of the series' first female protagonist, Aveline, an American assassin of French and African heritage. This being a Vita game, it looks to replicate the console experience on the go. But it comes from Ubisoft Sofia, developer of the 3DS's *Ghost Recon: Shadow Wars*, so it may do something interesting with the portable format.

RAIN

Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Sony
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



EXACTLY THE sort of game that Sony Japan does best, *Rain* is an *Ico*-like platform adventure that showcases unique art direction and inventive puzzles. Little has been confirmed, but the protagonist will be an invisible boy who can only be seen when he's rained on or when he splashes through a puddle. The enemies are governed by the same rules, which should make for a very cerebral chase.

PASSING TIME

Format: Android, PS Vita
Publisher: Honeyslug
Developer: In-house
ETA: November



NEW FROM Sony's cross-platform PlayStation Mobile initiative, *Passing Time* comes from *Frobisher Says* creator Honeyslug and displays a similar level of humour. While it looks like an homage to *Sensible Soccer*, the key difference is that the players auto-run, leaving you to control passes and shots. A range of effects on the ball can change it into a fireball or bowling ball, with surprising consequences.

LEGO THE LORD OF THE RINGS

Format: Multi
Publisher: Warner Bros
Developer: Traveller's Tales
ETA: November



THE TEASER trailer, which initially appeared on the *Lego Batman 2* disc, left us cold after the use of the film's dialogue suggested a more straight adaptation than usually found in the *Lego* games. Thankfully, the newest footage is exactly what we were hoping for. Though all the characters are voiced, this is all-new dialogue, written specifically to lovingly mock the movie trilogy. Faith restored.



DELAYED – Sly Cooper: Thieves In Time (PS3, PS Vita)

Originally slated for a 2012 release, this *Sly Cooper* sequel won't now come to Europe until March. Why? There may be a clue in the title…

DELAYED – Star Trek: Infinite Space (PC)

The browser-based free-to-play MMO has been cancelled due to a lack of publisher interest. We wonder if the poor performance of *Star Trek Online* had anything to do with it.

MEGA MAN XOVER

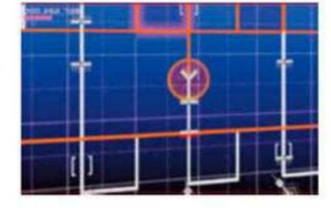
Format: **iOS**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Autumn**



AN ALL-NEW *Mega Man* to celebrate the Capcom hero's 25th anniversary. This one is billed as a "social RPG", and sees the player try to rescue all of the previous *Mega Man* heroes, from the original series, *X*, *Zero* and *Battle Network*, with a new robot to level up and customise to their liking. The battle system looks to combine traditional *Mega Man* gameplay with a *Paper Mario*-style system.

ESCAPEVEKTOR

Format: **3DS, PS Vita**
Publisher: **Nnooo**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **December**



CHAPTER 1 of this action-puzzler debuted on WiiWare last year, but the series is coming to handhelds as a package. Taking inspiration from all manner of works, including *Tron*, *Portal* and *Super Mario World*, *escapeVektor* is best described as a sci-fi *Pac-Man*. Introducing several new abilities and enemies along the way, however, it quickly becomes more complicated and challenging.

SPIRIT HUNTERS INC

Format: **DSi**
Publisher: **Nnooo**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **November**



THIS DOES what Nintendo should have done years ago, giving kids a way to track down and capture monsters by exploring their own surroundings. For slightly older kids, *Spirit Hunters* keeps things interesting with an accomplished set of RPG mechanics as well as an MMO-like bar of spells and abilities to use. Nnooo has revealed to us that it's considering a *Spirit Hunters* game for the Wii U too.

INTERNATIONAL RACING SQUIRRELS

Format: **iPad**
Publisher: **Playniac**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **November**



ALREADY AVAILABLE as a free-to-play web game, *International Racing Squirrels* was co-funded by Channel 4 and seems like a perfect pick for the broadcaster's sensibilities. A sports management game with a strangely dark sense of humour, it should prove quite popular when it makes its way to the iPad later this year. In the meantime, have a look at the web version at **playracingsquirrels.com**.

FAMILY GUY: BACK TO THE MULTIVERSE

Format: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Activision**
Developer: **Heavy Iron Studios**
ETA: **November**



BACK TO The Multiverse, as *Family Guy* fans may be able to tell, is based on the popular 'Road To The Multiverse' episode, in which Stewie and Brian travel through various dimensions. Many of those in the show re-interpret the *Family Guy* world through different animation styles, and while there's no sign of that in the first screens, we'd expect it to parody a few different videogames along the way.

PRIMORDIA

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Wadjet Eye Games**
Developer: **Wormwood Studios**
ETA: **December**



WHILE WE wait for Revolution to start work on a *Beneath A Steel Sky* sequel, *Primordia* may be the next best thing. This cyberpunk adventure has a similar vibe, right down to a sarcastic robotic companion, and its hand-drawn art evokes the same sense of industrial despair. Published by Wadjet Eye Games, which also brought us *Emerald City Confidential* and *Gemini Rue*, this may well be as special.

KAMIPARA

Format: **PlayStation 3**
Publisher: **Nippon Ichi**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



A NEW title from the *Disgaea* team, *Kamisama To Unmei Kakumei No Paradox*, to give its full name, is an RPG where you play as Renya, a young man who becomes a god and must work to fulfil the wishes of his people. In the hands of BioWare or Bethesda this would surely make for some difficult dilemmas, but Nippon Ichi will probably just use the situations for comedy dialogue and tactical battles.

HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **GameMill**
Developer: **WayForward Technologies**
ETA: **November**



WE HAD no idea what *Hotel Transylvania* was, so we had to look it up. Turns out it's an animated film featuring the voice of Adam Sandler… Oh, say no more. But the official game, particularly the 3DS version, looks pretty good. Made by WayForward, it's a great little *Castlevania* clone, complete with non-linear maps, and, unlike Konami's *Mirror Of Fate*, this one plays totally in 2D.



WHY I ♥...

Lost Odyssey

ROD FERGUSSON, IRRATIONAL GAMES

For me, my favourite games are time-sensitive. I have a real problem going back to play an old game because production values and graphics really do have an impact on me, so when I try to go back I struggle with older games.

An odd one for me was Lost Odyssey*. I put over 75 hours into that game and I don't play JRPGs that much, but in that one there was just something about the adultness… There's a point in that game where you host your daughter's funeral! Stuff like that was so non-traditional and in that moment in time it really struck me.*

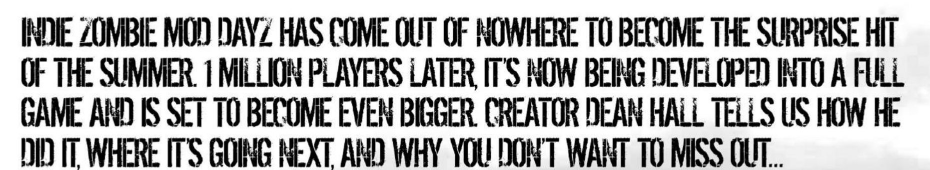
I'd love to have a list of favourites like that, but as I change and mature, my tastes do too, so every year I have a new favourite.



"There's a point in that game where you host your daughter's funeral! Stuff like that was so non-traditional"

ROD FERGUSSON, IRRATIONAL GAMES


STAND


INDIE ZOMBIE MOD DAYZ HAS COME OUT OF NOWHERE TO BECOME THE SURPRISE HIT OF THE SUMMER. 1 MILLION PLAYERS LATER, IT'S NOW BEING DEVELOPED INTO A FULL GAME AND IS SET TO BECOME EVEN BIGGER. CREATOR DEAN HALL TELLS US HOW HE DID IT, WHERE IT'S GOING NEXT, AND WHY YOU DON'T WANT TO MISS OUT...

TITLE: **DayZ**
FORMAT: **PC**
DEVELOPER: **Dean Hall**
PUBLISHER: **Bohemia Interactive**
RELEASE: **Out now (mod), Late 2012 (standalone release)**

True story: half a dozen n00bs spawn on a beach and warily creep up to the mainland as if it were the Normandy coast in 1944. Spurred by the camaraderie brought on by their mutual, hapless plight and lulled into a false sense of security by the apparent lack of immediate death in their group, they make their way to the airfield. Here, they rightly embrace the environmental realism of Chernarus and blithely scavenge around the area, oblivious to the arrival of their imminent doom.

A stranger steps onto the scene. He doesn't speak, even to reply to their naive greetings, and though he has a hatchet, his real weapon is knowledge: he knows he's going to brutally murder these clueless players in cold blood, just for the hell of it. He hamstrings every single one of them and then, while they're crawling around asking their assailant what he's doing, he calmly replies by hacking them to death.

That's the favourite *DayZ* story of the creator of this burgeoning *Arma II* mod, Dean Hall. A cruel lesson for all would-be new players in the realities of this zombie survival game. For us, it highlights an important parallel with another PC sandbox fairytale, *Minecraft*, whose explosive success last year is still very fresh in our minds. In both indie games, you are given a world and the tools to survive in it but not the challenges; those are set by the individual and other players. In this case, your destiny depends not on the infected hordes or the whim of a Creeper, but on the mood of the player-controlled population in the area and what you decide to do next.

"The key to this was that people naturally tell stories," Hall told us when we asked about *DayZ*'s recent success. "It's a human thing, and with most games you have the story given to you by the designer or the developer. With *DayZ*, you experience your own story as part of it. As you experience that story, you have these really intense emotional reactions. At the end of it, you have this natural compulsion to go out and tell people what you've experienced, so suddenly you have people posting about having this crazy experience, or going on forums, and it exploded from there."

Stories like the airfield massacre pop up frequently on the 'Bandit Campfire' and 'Survivor HQ' sections of the *DayZ* forum, and every now and then, one resonates with the kind of emergent gameplay that drives indie games like *DayZ* out of their niche and onto the fringes of gaming mass consciousness. Hall tells us the tale of the 'black widow', a female bandit playing the damsel in distress and luring unwitting players to their death, before stealing their gear. Or the Chernarus doctor on call, a digital Good Samaritan putting his own life at risk to fix the ailments of the wasteland wounded. Stories are why *DayZ* has gone from a relatively unknown *Arma II* mod with two servers to an indie phenomenon with over a million unique players and 1,000-plus servers in the space of three months.

■ IS *DAYZ* COMPETITIVE OR CO-OP MULTIPLAYER? THE ANSWER IS IT'S BOTH AND NEITHER, DEPENDING ON WHO YOU HAPPEN TO COME ACROSS.

It's this aspirational idea of a game that takes the stabilisers off that has made *DayZ* and its sandbox contemporaries a success; it lets you take the ride wherever you want in an unscripted environment with players who are similarly unshackled. *Garry's Mod*'s genius iterative development piqued the interest of Valve after it was released as a Source engine playground in 2004 and updated in the open. It, too, had no objectives or story, and it was probably less a conventional 'game' than *Minecraft* or *DayZ*, yet players took to the virtual *Half-Life 2* toolbox in droves, creating everything from ad-hoc weapons to gigantic robots and multiple spawns of unique characters in hilarious parodies of the *Half-Life* universe. *GMod*'s success as a free-to-play add-on encouraged creator Garry Newman and Valve to take it standalone and, to this day, *GMod* is nearly as legendary as the game that spawned it. Games like Freeze Tag, Spacebuild and Prop Hunt came to the fore and stories of their insane genius spread, to which we'd dedicate a few paragraphs describing each if it wasn't such a huge digression. Look them up, because they're worth reading about – or better still, play them if you haven't already.

"IT'S A VERY SIMPLE GAME AND A VERY SIMPLE DESIGN, BUT THE TENSION IT CREATES IS VERY COMPLEX"

We called it 'emergent' gaming at the time and applied the same term to gameplay that has resulted in the lore that's developing in *DayZ*, but even if the mod team couldn't have predicted exactly what its fans would do with the sandbox, they must have known this kind of sophisticated play would be the fruit of their growing community. That's the inevitable result of drawing players into an environment that has no rules: they make their own up. So the question we have to ask the *DayZ* creator is why bother with the zombies?

"It's an interesting question, and I think a lot of it comes down to people's natural fears," replies Hall. "People fear a lot of things and people want to know how they'd get on in a disaster situation. When life changes, when all the rules of life are removed and it's just you versus the world, people inside [the world] want to know if they've got what it takes and they want to explore that. That's what zombies allow them to do. I guess zombies are a simplified version of all those disaster scenario fears.

"I did really like *Left 4 Dead*. I played it a lot when I was based in Singapore and it does what it tries to do really well. I'm really interested in horror. I like the subtleties in games like the original *Aliens vs Predator*. The flares, the flickering lights… Just these little, subtle things, and that's what *DayZ* was: an attempt to have all these subtle tensions placed on the player to produce these experiences. If you actually look at it, it's a very simple game and a very simple design, but the tension it creates is very complex, and that's where the inspiration came from, and from movies and books like *The Road* – that was obviously a big influence. Even *Fallout 3*. I love *Fallout 3*, but I didn't like how safe it was; it always felt like it was very hard to



■ VEHICLES ARE A SCARCE, VALUABLE RESOURCE, OFTEN ENDING UP IN THE HANDS OF WELL-SUPPLIED BANDIT GROUPS.

REANIMATING DAYZ

Bohemia Interactive's Matt Lightfoot discusses the process of converting DayZ into a standalone game and the publisher's post-release plans

How much work is involved in converting *DayZ* to a standalone game?
There is quite a bit of work involved in converting *DayZ* into a standalone game. Compared to starting a game from scratch, there is significantly less work, as we are using the *Arma II* engine as a base and expanding upon it to make it better for *DayZ*.

Are you planning to add any extra content?
Yes, there will be extras. One of the big changes will be Chernarus Plus, which is an improved version of the Chernarus map. Adding in some more geographic features and adding in new towns and landmarks, giving players more places to explore and be hunted in the standalone version.

Dean Hall has expressed interest in taking *DayZ* to consoles. What's stopping you?
Well, before we are able to port *DayZ* to consoles we have to gain the sales on the PC first.

When Valve brought Turtle Rock Studios into its fold to finish *Left 4 Dead*, it very quickly followed it up with *Left 4 Dead 2*, making greater use of the studio's resources.

Do you see Bohemia Interactive doing something similar and moving onto a *DayZ 2* so quickly, perhaps using the opportunity to design it as a console game?
Well, at the moment our focus is on *DayZ* standalone and we will be updating *DayZ* standalone with new content after the alpha release, so we haven't thought about *DayZ 2* yet.

lose and the only requirement was to invest time. There was no time to think really, and you could just kind of blindly go forward and I didn't want that. I wanted *DayZ* to be… if you don't think about it, you're losing everything."

The tales of the *DayZ* team's development struggles are testament to its success: capacity problems with every update as servers burn out with the number of players logging on; repeated denial of service attacks by malicious cyber-criminals looking for the next popular target; trouble maintaining the core concept of *DayZ* as populations spiral far beyond imagination and, of course now, taking *DayZ* from *Arma II* mod to a game in its own right. "I knew pretty early on it was going to have to go standalone once we had about 300,000 users. I knew the mod was never going to be able to cope with the demand. There was virtually no development being done on the mod; it was all on capacity and dealing with problems. When we hit that point we realised the mod was never going to survive – it was a terminal trajectory."

To the videogame novice, Markus Persson's classic *Minecraft* is far removed from *DayZ*, but this blocky sandbox world also surprised the industry with its viral spread. The alpha was released in 2009 as a paid-for trial, and by a month after the beta release in January 2011, over 1 million people had bought it without a whiff of marketing – pure word of mouth. Incredibly, by the time version 1.0 had been released, *Minecraft* had notched up over 4 million purchases and had 16 million players. *DayZ*'s four months in the wild suggest that it's on track for a similar success, and though the free mod itself

VIRAL OUTBREAK

We chart the DayZ worldwide infection to date

ONE MONTH 13/06/12
DOWNLOADS: 206,511

DAYZ OUTBREAK PRAGUE 13/05/12

TWO MONTHS 17/07/12
DOWNLOADS: 618,381

DAYZ INSPIRED BY BRUNEI JUNGLE TRAINING

THREE MONTHS 6/08/12
DOWNLOADS: 1 MILLION

ZOMBIES KILLED 2,147,483,647
MURDERS 8,288,611

DAYZ CONCEIVED IN NEW ZEALAND ARMY

THE MODDING WORLD

AS DAYZ PROVES THE MODDING COMMUNITY IS FAR FROM DEAD, WE LOOK BACK AT SEVEN MODS THAT REDEFINED THE GAMES THEY WERE BASED ON AND THEIR PASSIONATE COMMUNITIES THAT PROPELLED THEM TO ASTONISHING SUCCESS

ALIENS TC



In one of the first ever total conversion mods, Justin Fisher transformed id Software's seminal shooter *Doom* into a perfectly judged adaptation of James Cameron's *Aliens* movie. It effectively evoked the source material's tone – the opening level is a masterclass in suspense, while being completely devoid of enemies – and it went on to influence 1998's ambitious *Trespasser* by DreamWorks Interactive.

COUNTER-STRIKE



Minh Le and Jess Cliffe took Valve's *Half-Life* and converted the sprawling, alien-filled landscape into a modern military battlefield. *Counter-Strike*'s overwhelming popularity prompted Valve to snap up the two designers and set them to work creating a full retail version of the mod. Over a decade later and the enduring appeal of its original incarnation remains steadfast, with players continuing to fill servers regardless of the release of its more recent incarnations.

GARRY'S MOD



Garry's Mod isn't so much a game as it is a veritable playground for users to explore the potential of the Source engine. There isn't any gameplay objective, but players can utilise a physics and tool gun to manipulate objects. No surprise that its chief contribution to the gaming community is the various fan-made videos created using the versatile mod.

DEAR ESTHER



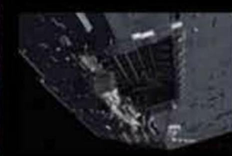
Another Source engine mod, *Dear Esther* was released back in 2008 by British indie outfit thechineseroom. Its unconventional framework – the game doesn't feature clear objectives, rather focusing on the epistolary narrative – was embraced and spawned a remake that was released earlier in the year.

DEFENSE OF THE ANCIENTS



Defense Of The Ancients, more commonly known as *DOTA*, has roughly 20 million dedicated players in China and spawned its own genre since it was released in 2003. A mod based on Blizzard's *Warcraft III*, it's become one of the most successful mods of all time and attracted the attention of Valve, where the sequel is currently being developed with mod creator IceFrog.

FREEWORLDS: TIDES OF WAR



There hasn't been a great *Star Wars* starfighter simulator for years, so it was down to the modding community to take *Freelancer* and reskin the whole game with classic *Star Wars* models. If you prefer your sci-fi with a bit more grit then you can always opt for the similar *Battlestar Galactica* total conversion instead.

TEAM FORTRESS



It's easy to forget that *Team Fortress* started life as a mod on id's *Quake* engine. The innovative class-based gameplay struck a chord with PC gamers, and once again those omnipotent beings at Valve took notice and hired Robin Walker, John Cook and Ian Caughley to remake it as *Team Fortress Classic* and create a sequel.

WASTELAND ETHICS

Do DayZ's bandit and survivor factions have a code of ethics? We speak to the players to find out...

THE SURVIVORS

CRONIC

"Up until the tipping point, our 'civilised' society has taught us all its idea of morality the moment you were born. But as soon as that order has been lost, when society takes the plunge and crumbles, the luxury of principles, morals? No, you gotta do what you gotta do. No time to hesitate. You got the shot? Take it and camp. Sleep well."

STEVE.C

"I will not shoot unless force is escalated. I've changed from 'I will not shoot unless shot at' due to one guy to whom I gave a gun. I will shoot if you continue to point your weapon in my direction after being warned not to. I will never shoot prior to giving multiple verbal commands. If I see a tent, I will always leave it be. If I see a vehicle in a non-spawn location, I will always leave it. If you ever see me near your tent, your contents are safe and, if it's empty, you may find food and extra ammo in it. I will never take the fruits of your labour. As in real life, if I can help you without causing harm to myself, I will do it. If I've just eaten and have but one can of beans, and you are starving, you are welcome to it; I will find more before I starve. If you need medical help and I have extra morphine, a blood pack, a bandage or some steaks, I will help you in any way I can. If we're pinned down by snipers or others, I will provide cover fire so that we may get out of danger. If you're being chased by a pack of zombies, I will distract them so that you may evade or heal yourself. My ethics are inflexible and are not changed by apocalypse. I tend to play zombie games because I find war reprehensible."

THE BANDITS

SP45M

"I would gut you and eat your spleen."

HYDRA

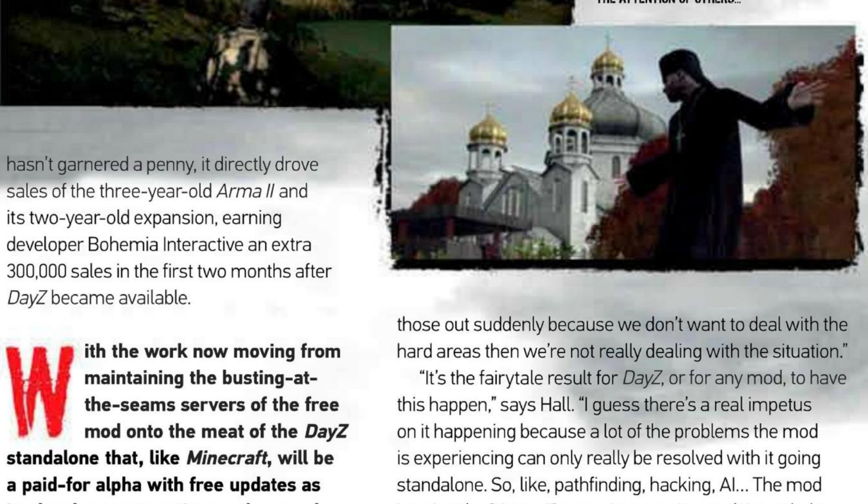
"If a real-life apocalypse came about, I would at least try not to be a dick. But a man desperate for substance, desperate for life, is known to do some nasty fucking things..."

EDWARD B

"My survival is more important to me than your survival."

JARETHJAMS

"I'll defend what's mine and the people I love, but in *DayZ*, fuck all of you. No hard feelings, fellas."



BUILDINGS MIGHT CONTAIN GOODIES AND OFFER SHELTER, BUT THEY'RE LIKELY TO ATTRACT THE ATTENTION OF OTHERS...

hasn't garnered a penny, it directly drove sales of the three-year-old *Arma II* and its two-year-old expansion, earning developer Bohemia Interactive an extra 300,000 sales in the first two months after *DayZ* became available.

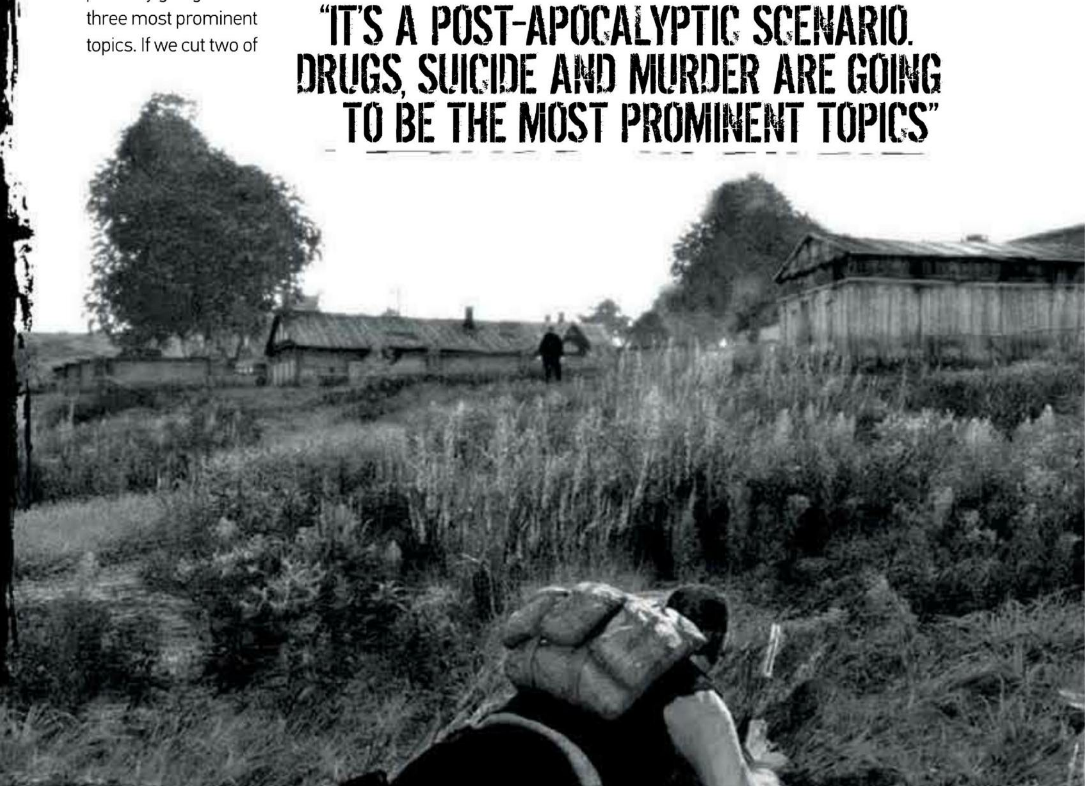
With the work now moving from maintaining the busting-at-the-seams servers of the free mod onto the meat of the *DayZ* standalone that, like *Minecraft*, will be a paid-for alpha with free updates as its development continues, the mood is decidedly upbeat. Hall talks of some of the potential thematically relevant adult features he's carefully toying with. It's not just that the taboo subjects of drugs and suicide could throw a spanner of controversy into the works, but in applying tools to this sandbox environment he doesn't want to upset the balance.

"I think it's good that games like *Fallout* explored these because they're too much of a no-no word," he says. "Movies explore them, TV explores them, so games should too. Obviously you have to explore them carefully, but we don't know how we're going to explore them. We won't explore them so they endanger the project, but they're relevant. It's a post-apocalyptic scenario. Drugs, suicide and murder are probably going to be the three most prominent topics. If we cut two of those out suddenly because we don't want to deal with the hard areas then we're not really dealing with the situation."

"It's the fairytale result for *DayZ*, or for any mod, to have this happen," says Hall. "I guess there's a real impetus on it happening because a lot of the problems the mod is experiencing can only really be resolved with it going standalone. So, like, pathfinding, hacking, AI... The mod is using the [*Arma II*] game in a way it wasn't intended to be used. Now we have the standalone, though, we can branch out and do that quite quickly."

The question of *DayZ* repeating *Minecraft*'s success in going from indie sensation to mainstream success and eventually making its way to consoles is clearly not far from Hall's mind either. "I think it's a staged, approached thing," he posits. "At the moment we're very much in the experimentation phase, and that's what the PC is awesome for. So we'll experiment with it and keep the experience good, and if the sales are good it means the demand is there and then we can look at what's out there. I think it's definitely achievable. I think if we did 2 million sales then we'd start to look at that kind of thing being quite achievable. *Arma* already has a background in going onto the 360 [through Bohemia Interactive's *Operation Flashpoint* series], so there's definitely a possibility."

"IT'S A POST-APOCALYPTIC SCENARIO. DRUGS, SUICIDE AND MURDER ARE GOING TO BE THE MOST PROMINENT TOPICS"





TALES FROM CHERNARUS

DayZ's community of players describe to us their favourite moments…

Z_STATIK_Z

"I was roaming around in Elektro one night. I had a revolver and I saw a flare on a dead body. I thought, 'What the hell, this is a trap, but let's do this.' It was empty. I hear people yelling at me over direct chat to lay face down and drop my pistol. I comply. One of my two attackers starts looking in my backpack. While he is doing this, I harmlessly take a peek into his nice big ol' Coyote Pack. I slip out his AKM and one mag. He goes over to his friend to give him my only pack of painkillers, and while they are doing this I reload the AKM. I walk up behind them, then proceed to hose [them] down with an AKM. I then get overrun by zombies and die."

MARSHMALLOW

"I always play as a survivor and make it a mission to pick off bandits whenever possible. One time, I was just north of Cherno, and just as I was coming out of a barn, shots from a nearby hill started hitting the ground at my feet. I was able to dodge the shooting as I weaved my way into a forest where the sniper gave up. I lay there for about 20 minutes, waiting for him to make an appearance, until about half a kilometre away, I could see a firefight between two guys in ghillie suits and another victim. They took out the poor guy and I assumed they were the guys who were shooting at me, so I patiently crawled my way toward their position where they were looting the body and just hanging out. With my CZ, I aimed at one of the perps. Click… pow!"

THEPASCH

"A friend of mine and me were on the way to Elektrozavodsk to stock up on medical supplies, food, drinks and ammo. We both entered a bar that was situated in the corner of an apartment building. We separated, thoroughly searching the first floor. I found stairs and climbed them, entering the second floor. So my friend was now in the first floor, and I was in the second floor. The stairs were located in a very narrow and small hallway on both floors. I had my gun in my hands, scanning the floor for supplies, and so was my friend, just a floor below me. So far, so good. I swung my view to the left and my mouse hit the right side of the keyboard, causing my finger to push down the left mouse key, which caused me to release a shot. And that shot was heard by them. I could hear [zombies], screaming, roaring, running towards the building that the distinctly loud sound came from.

"'They're coming up the stairs!' said my friend. Wait. The stairs were my only way out. And indeed they were coming up the stairs. Loads of them, walking slowly towards me, seeking to tear my delicious flesh from my bones. Then, between two zombies, opened up a narrow way. It was a way out. Sprinting down the stairs, I made my way onto the streets where more of them were waiting for me. All the hits I received caused me to bleed, and I was not in a good condition. My friend had already made his way to the hospital roof, the ladder being surrounded by zombies trying to get up to him. 'I'll cover you! Get up here!' he shouted. I followed his advice, running around the hospital, trying to find a ladder that had not yet been swarmed by zombies. I was being followed by them, but my friend did a good job at decimating their numbers. And finally, I was able to climb up the ladder to safety."

> "I WALK UP BEHIND THEM, THEN HOSE THEM DOWN WITH AN AKM. I THEN GET OVERRUN BY ZOMBIES AND DIE"

COBAAS

"I had just spawned on the beach near Kamenka, and had nothing of use, so I decided to head north into the woods before heading east to Cherno. As I was moving, I saw something running past the edge of the woods I was in, and when I looked closer, it turned out to be three bandits. As I had no weapons I couldn't shoot them, so I had to be stealthy. For the next 40-odd minutes I was following them, sticking to the woods as much as I could, until eventually they stopped at their camp, and then they logged out. I ran down to their tents and stole what I needed. So stalking bandits paid off!"

HYDRA

"Spawned in Kamenka, city of death. A group of seven or eight wookies were sitting there with powerful gear. They spot me and another survivor and act all friendly and shit. They take us to our camp. They off the other dude for not following their directions. Bastards killed Timmy. We get to their camp, and they bid me gather as much gear as I'd like. I find a satchel charge. To my astonishment, they build a fireplace and all sit around it. I run over to the fire and place the explosive. They thought I was just fucking with the fireplace. I back up a safe distance, then scream 'FOR TIMMY!' into direct and touch off the charge. All are instantly killed. They start freaking out in the side chat. I talk to them in it while I take what I want from their bodies, tents and vehicles, then hide the bodies, destroy the tents, and destroy all of their vehicles save their helicopter, which I stole and jumped out of near Cherno. The chopper collides with the city hall and apparently kills another as I safely float down to the ground with a parachute."


NO
TRESPASSING
The World of Neopia
77460
5420
5000

THE TRUE PRICE OF FREE-TO-PLAY

In an increasingly erratic marketplace, free-to-play games are carving unique opportunities for both publishers and developers alike. Canvassing the games industry, we question whether free-to-play could be the future or a rip-off and try to identify the true value of the videogame















Bruce Grove, OnLive · David Brevik, Gazillion Ent · David Darling, Kwalee · Rune Vendler, Hapti.co · Tore Blystad, IO Interactive · Graeme Struthers, Devolver Digital · John Lagrave, Blizzard · Mike O'Brien, ArenaNet · Peter Holzapfel, Crytek · Yosuke Hayashi, Team Ninja · Alex Hutchinson, Ubisoft Montreal

The videogame industry is in a state of transition and the truth is nobody quite knows what to expect. While the next wave of hardware is assured to have an untold effect on the industry, we've seen the landscape shift in the face of plummeting retail sales and the advent of Facebook and iOS games conquering a market that had previously gone disregarded. So are the days of the £50 videogame dead? Well, if industry pundits are to be believed, free-to-play may well hold the answer.

Already incredibly prevalent in countries such as South Korea and Russia, dominating 90 per cent of their gaming market, recent years have seen free-to-play creep into Western territories through social games such as *FarmVille* and *Draw Something*, through to large-scale MMOs and, more recently, first-person shooters. Crytek CEO Cevat Yerli stated earlier in the year that the studio is moving exclusively into the free-to-play realm, and weighty companies such as EA and Valve have stated their intent through studio acquisitions and remodelling IPs around the burgeoning business model.

It's easy to see why it has become such an industry-wide trend. In its most basic form, it enables players to jump straight into a product without any upfront cost, turning a torrent of genres into highly accessible experiences. But as the old adage goes, there's no such thing as a free lunch. Revenue is accrued through a delicate combination of in-game advertisements and microtransactions, alluring players with game-changing enhancements, in-game cash and hats. Oh boy, there sure are a lot of hats.

What has surprised most is the range of free-to-play experiences available, from casual mobile games, through to vast MMO worlds and even triple-A experiences. Activision launching *Call Of Duty Online* in Eastern territories in the coming months is indicative of the industry-wide effect that free-to-play is having. With the monumental success of these myriad experiences, it makes sense that veteran industry developers are looking to free-to-play as a potentially profitable creative avenue to explore.

"I think it's a very good thing for consumers to have access to high-quality free games," says co-founder of Codemasters David Darling, now founder and CEO of smartphone app developer and publisher Kwalee. "It's a very competitive part of the market and it's only the games that are really good fun that go to the top of the charts. The general perception is that free games would be poor quality, but in actual fact they are driving quality standards higher in the industry."

It's a bold statement and one not without merit. While various ephemeral products populate Apple's App Store, social games, browser-based entertainment and new platforms offer more comprehensive experiences. Valve's recently pledged its allegiance, offering *Team Fortress 2* as free-to-play with unique in-game equipment attainable through microtransactions and will continue this template with the eagerly anticipated *Dota 2*. Likewise, Crytek is on the verge of launching *Warface* – a free-to-play first-person shooter that the company describes as a completely triple-A experience.

"In the past, it wasn't our biggest strength to be accessible hardware-wise, and with *Warface* we want to be accessible on every level," explains producer Peter Holzapfel. "For us, as we've already stated, it's going to be a very important part of our strategy. With free-to-play we can widen the audience we can reach and get more people to play our games, and we feel with the triple-A quality we can deliver as Crytek, there is also a lot of free space in the market. It feels like the quality level we can reach with *Warface* hasn't been reached with a free-to-play title before, and we hope we can plant our flag there and make an impression."

Warface has already soared to success in Russia and China, but with the regions so vastly different to

Free-To-Play Explained

A breakdown of the different free-to-play models currently used by developers and publishers

Totally free

■ Does exactly what it says on the tin. Few big-name free-to-play games are actually truly free of any in-game purchases, advertisements or gameplay barriers. You'll find many of these as open-source or independent projects online, rather than any big-budget titles – a testing ground for indie developers.

EXAMPLES: ***Minecraft Classic*, *Spelunky*, *Cave Story***

Free with ads

■ A graceless alternative to selling your game. Developers such as Rovio have used this model to release previously paid-for games at no charge, with ads popping up mid-game. Alongside advergames – free games that act as one big advert – other titles have been known to front-load menus with advertisements, but rarely do publishers solely rely on this method.

EXAMPLES: ***Angry Birds* (Android), *Words With Friends*, *Doritos Crash Course***

Free with microtransactions

■ The most popular free-to-play model in the industry, microtransactions secure a constant stream of revenue for the publisher and developer. Some titles have been known to tilt gameplay unfairly towards purchases to give paying players an advantage – hence 'pay-to-win' – while others sell accessories, vanity items and short cuts to later rewards.

EXAMPLES: ***FarmVille*, *Team Fortress 2*, *RuneScape*, *Warface***

One-off payment without subscription (MMO)

■ This exclusively applies to MMOs. *Guild Wars* established this template, selling the game at retail but without a subscription, offering in-game items to drive profits. It's not completely free-to-play, but it's an innovative strategy that falls somewhere between traditional retail business and free-to-play.

EXAMPLES: ***Guild Wars***

Free up until a cap

■ Several games on Google Play and the Apple App Store are free to download but require payment if you want to progress past a certain point. It has also become a popular model with higher-profile MMOs, with *World Of Warcraft* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* enabling players to roam their respective realms without paying up until they hit a level cap, meaning casual players can have fun at no cost and only pay to reach the more advanced endgame content.

EXAMPLES: ***World Of Warcraft*, *New Star Soccer*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic***

■ Free and 69p games supported by in-app purchases dominate the App Store game chart.



that of mainstream Western tastes, the studio has had to rethink the business model so that it aligns with the sensibilities of a new player base.

"The tricky part is to find the right balance for your local territory," admits Holzapfel. "I believe that Western players are very sensitive towards pay-to-win, but for us it feels that there are other approaches that are more interesting that are down to the general gameplay experience. It's hard to balance but not impossible."

Pay-to-win is a term that can't escape overtly negative connotations. The basic idea behind the principle is that players must invest a certain amount of real-world currency to progress through a game, or otherwise face a gameplay impediment. Several social games have come under fire for exploiting their users in this manner, and it's an issue that has made publishers and developers wary of the free-to-play infrastructure.

Australian studio Nnooo has predominantly specialised in iOS and DSiWare titles, and founder Nic Watt feels that, while the business model has value, he's not sure whether it's viable long-term. "I obviously like the fact that you can reach a larger user base quite quickly," he says, "but a lot of companies are just gunning for that now. EA seems to be changing a lot of its strategies to go to free-to-play, and obviously Zynga are basically entirely free-to-play. Whenever something is new and sexy, there's always a gold rush for a while, and I think the likes of Capcom, EA and Konami are going to find it very difficult for them to turn around if things change."

But even if this trend proves to be short-lived, Watt feels uncomfortable with some of the methods employed to make money through these social and free-to-play games, specifically those that offer a taste of an experience but withhold content and obstruct progress to tempt money from the consumer's pocket.

"IT SEEMS TO be something that is naturally emerging. Every game is designed to have a specific purpose. With free-to-play, you can create games that work really well with this model and be a very natural part of the gameplay and game mechanics, but if you're only making it to try and squeeze out money from people then it becomes less of a game and more of a money machine. Us as developers want to make something that's fun to play for the players and feels like the publishing method and the game mechanics are working together as a whole."

Tore Blystad, IO Interactive

"It feels a little bit like being a drug dealer in that you give a lot of stuff away, but you're trying to entice as many people into your drugs as quickly as possible so they get addicted and pay you money," he says. "I find that morally quite difficult to justify. Particularly when you hear companies like EA and Zynga describe their big buyers as 'whales'. I would find it difficult running my company if I find out that my user, as nice as it is, is spending 13,000 or 20,000 dollars. If you've got people spending that sort of money in *FarmVille* then there's something not quite right about that person and you're basically exploiting them."

It's also an issue that's on the mind of larger studios. Ubisoft has recently entered the free-to-play arena with offshoots of its tentpole titles – *Ghost Recon Commander* launched on Facebook back in May – but Ubisoft Montreal's Alex Hutchinson is still reserved on the subject, expressing concerns that the industry has yet to gain a firm grasp on the monetisation system. Much like Watt, Hutchinson is wary of developers using in-game purchases as a quick means to turn a profit on games that are relatively cheap to develop.

"I hope the future for social media and free-to-play becomes more about the games, because at the moment it's all about the business model and I find that incredibly disheartening," he says. "If the future of our business is making glorified poker machines, I'm going to go write books. I really don't want to be in a business where we're not focusing on the creative, where we're not focusing on delivering new experiences to people. My hope for the future is I think all these new streams will become like the old streams, bizarrely. When they have to compete with each other they'll have to compete on content and quality. Once you start doing that, your business changes. So, ironically, I see both big games becoming more like free-to-play and free-to-play becoming more like big games."

TOP 5 RIDICULOUS IN-GAME PURCHASES

Sometimes they cost $10,000, and other times they're just some piece of crap that some third-party developer has chucked into a game. Either way, there are some truly bizarre in-app purchases around, and here are some of them

Curiosity

ITEM: £50,000 CHISEL

At the time of writing, Peter Molyneux's cube-chipping revolution has yet to release. However, he has confirmed that there will be one £50,000 chisel available to a single person with more money than sense. With no guarantee that this chisel will reveal what is inside the box, we can't think of a worse way to frivolously blow such a large amount of cash.

Second Life

ITEM: AMSTERDAM

While the exchange rate on *Second Life*'s virtual currency – Linden Dollars – is in a constant state of flux, the developer's website confirms that the most expensive in-game purchase rang the tills to the tune of $50,000. The item? The whole region of Amsterdam. Sounds to us like some desperate autocrat netted himself a real bargain.





PlayStation Home

ITEM: BEAUTIFUL EYES

These are just plain weird. If you've ever thought your PlayStation Home avatar had the icy gaze of a decomposed corpse, these Beautiful Eyes will bring some life back into your virtual shell.

Entropia Universe

ITEM: CLUB NEVERDIE

It seems like these virtual worlds attract the wealthiest individuals in gaming. Club Neverdie is an asteroid space resort in *Entropia Universe* that one Jon Jacobs bought for a staggering $100,000. Jacobs had to mortgage his own house to afford the property. The investment paid off, considering it's now worth $1 million and Jacobs receives daily revenue from the floating piece of virtual rock.

FarmVille

ITEM: UNWITHER RING

This limited offer on *FarmVille* caused a controversy when released. An item that could only be gifted, this ring that would prevent crops from withering had a real-world value of $40, pushing the game's microtransaction model into uncomfortable territory.

Developers on the ground level may be feeling the strain creatively, but there's a greater risk to publishers as they try and adapt existing IPs to the format. 2009 was a banner year for free-to-play, with Zynga launching *FarmVille*, EA opening the doors to its cartoonish *Battlefield Heroes*, Sony entering the market with *Free Realms*, and *Quake Live* reinventing id Software's seminal shooter. Except for perhaps *FarmVille*, all of the above were likely to be successes due to publisher muscle and brand familiarity. But for a smaller publisher trying to enter the arena, the market is fraught with pitfalls.

Graeme Struthers of Texas-based publisher Devolver Digital can't see how the model is feasible for his and similar companies. "I guess I kind of retreat into my naive, childish mindset of, like, 'How can I possibly make any money out of something that is free?'" he reasons. "I know you can then talk about in-app or ad-related revenues, but until the 20 or 30 people who keep telling me to do it show me how they make money and can prove that it's a valid motto, I'm really not interested.

"I don't understand how we as a business can say we're going to do this for free and pray and hope that it's going to lead us to revenue. I just don't see it. I think if you're a big company and you've got the weight of a big company and you've got the money to go out and promote then maybe that's a great model, but for people like us I just don't see it."

More optimistic about the transition to free-to-play is digital streaming service OnLive. In an interview prior to the company's restructuring in August, OnLive UK general manager Bruce Grove spoke to **games™** about how the cloud-based streaming service could capitalise on free-to-play.

"We've been looking at free-to-play," he admits, "but we don't have a free-to-play model today. It's something we're actively investigating. As a platform, and as someone who is running large data centre operations and delivering content, we have to consider the economics and how everything fits into it."

Still, Grove is aware that if the free-to-play market continues to swell at a staggering rate, there's a chance that digital stores will become saturated and quality gaming experiences will be buried. "I think that it's not that free-to-play replaces everything," he continues. "I've

"WE'VE BEEN LOOKING at the free-to-play model and discussing it internally. It is a new trend and we're open to it, but if you look at, for example, arcade games. Arcade games in the past had their own kind of model, their own game design. If you ported that onto consoles, it was a fairly boring experience. Arcade games usually, after the first few minutes, they tend to get a little more difficult in order for you to put more money in and keep going. So when games started to be developed more for home consoles, the development side of things started to change, and I think the same thing would have to happen with the free-to-play model. Rather than cut up a console game and put it on there – it wouldn't be a very kind service to people. You'd have to redesign the game system and the game design to put it on free-to-play, first of all. That'll be the biggest challenge if we do decide to participate."

Yosuke Hayashi, Team Ninja

10 OF THE BEST FREE-TO-PLAY GAMES

With Facebook, iOS, console and browser-based free-to-play experiences in abundance, we take a look at the best of the diverse catalogue of supposed wallet-friendly gaming available today and the actual level of potential spend



League Of Legends

■ Inspired by the persistently popular *Warcraft III* mod *DOTA*, Riot Games has had phenomenal success with *League Of Legends* since it went live in 2009. At its core it has a deceptively simple team-based attack-and-defend objective, but with around 80 character variants there's an abundance of skill involved if you want to conquer your enemies. Microtransactions form the basis of revenue, but extra characters and skins do little to impose on the balance of the founding gameplay principles.

Potential Spend: £££££



DC Universe Online

■ For superhero MMO *DC Universe Online*, moving to free-to-play less than a year after it hit the market was unequivocally the right decision. Concurrent user numbers increased 1,000 per cent and revenue increased by 700 per cent post-transition. Big fancy numbers aside, it's an exceptionally polished and engrossing MMO that's worth investing some serious hours into.

Potential Spend: £££££



Team Fortress 2

■ Some free-to-play games are designed as such, while others adapt themselves to the model to renew interest in the product. *Team Fortress 2* certainly falls into the latter group, with Valve's blend of beguiling animation and addictive gameplay the perfect fit for free-to-play. There are several game modes to enjoy, but the key here is how Valve refuses to allow microtransactions to impede gameplay. Plus, did we mention you can buy hats?

Potential Spend: £££££



World Of Tanks

■ This pseudo-simulator is perhaps the biggest free-to-play surprise currently on the marketplace. There's enough heft and explosive action to make it appeal to casual gamers, while the reverence paid to the vehicles will keep hobbyists squealing. Progression is sluggish to push players towards microtransactions, but patience is rewarded in firepower, and this game has plenty of it.

Potential Spend: £££££



Neopets

■ A sort of founding father when it comes to free-to-play and certainly one skewed a little younger than the majority of our readers. Nevertheless, *Neopets* is an admirable achievement and one that shouldn't be ignored based on its aesthetics. There is a wealth of content on offer here, with hundreds of mini-games that your personally designed Neopet can partake in. It set the template for every cutesy Facebook game that's ever spammed your news feed.

Potential Spend: £££££



Draw Something

■ Regardless of whether you're long tired of this social gaming whim, *Draw Something* had millions of players interacting over a simple spin on the classic *Pictionary* rules. Rarely does a game come along and transcend demographics, while igniting the imagination of half the world.

Potential Spend: £££££



Battlefield Heroes

■ This cartoony, free-to-play version of EA's popular FPS series barely resembles its progenitor. It's managed to carve itself a nice little niche, with over 10 million players running around, blasting each other into tiny chunks. The game did come under fire after EA tweaked the pricing model, placing a greater emphasis on paying to win, but it hasn't greatly affected the fundamental experience.

Potential Spend: £££££



The Lord Of The Rings Online

■ Another MMO that wisely took a quick turn down the free-to-play route for the better. *The Lord Of The Rings Online* was more than just a perfunctory furry-footed licensed cash grab, but an intricately crafted fantasy world based on a familiar series of books. Contentiously, it might just be better than *WOW*.

Potential Spend: £££££



Auto Club Revolution

■ The most astounding aspect of *Auto Club Revolution* is how much of an impact the community has had on the game's development. Eutechnyx has tweaked and modified the title over the years, which now stands as an incredibly deep racing sim with visuals on par with *Forza* or *Gran Turismo*.

Potential Spend: £££££



Minecraft Classic

■ Having now made all the money in the world out of his open-world build-a-thon, Notch's original *Minecraft* game can still be played online. It's a little rougher around the edges and lacks all the features, but the pure experience remains intact and there's no better time to jump on the bandwagon.

Potential Spend: £££££

been around long enough where I have seen different models come and go. I think what is going to happen is that it will become another model that works for certain things. As a platform, if you start pulling everything in as free-to-play, you end up with discoverability problems or an overload of content. It is important as well to solve the problem of someone who has been sitting there for a year working on their product and they just throw it into the free-to-play world – how do they get back all that work they've put into it? I think we get wrapped up in the argument of [whether] free-to-play is going to replace every other model. It's not. It's going to work very well for some things and not very well for others, and each of them will find a natural fit."

It certainly appears that free-to-play isn't the answer – at least not yet, anyway. Rather understandably, the concept is being approached with cautious optimism, underlined by heavy scepticism. Not everyone has the flexibility to dedicate themselves to the ideal wholly like Crytek, which could just as easily bounce back if the whole shebang flops catastrophically. But to get an idea of how studios and publishers can embrace the model, we turn our attention to a genre that has been at the vanguard of the free-to-play revolution.

Free-to-play has progressively become the dominant template by which all massively multiplayer online games are developed. *Achaea*, *Furcadia* and *RuneScape* have adopted a form of the business model since the mid-Nineties, with the latter registering roughly 10 million subscribers since it launched in 2001. Increasingly, new MMOs have been forced in this direction, due to both the overcrowded marketplace and the dominance of *World Of Warcraft*.

You only have to look at *Star Wars: The Old Republic*'s post-launch woes to see just how far the genre has transformed in recent years. The game didn't quite live up to the hype, ditching its entirely paid subscription model in less than a year. However, it's not a strategy befitting all MMOs, as Blizzard has resolutely stood by its subscription service, even in these difficult times.

"I think it's a good thing for some games that have been designed around it, but I don't think that directly applies to *World Of Warcraft*," states Blizzard's John Lagrave. "For MMOs in general, one of the things that's attractive is their egalitarian nature – everyone is entering this world and has the same chance to compete on a level playing field. In many cases, monetising the different elements of gameplay may hinder that."

Opposing that viewpoint is ex-Blizzard employee and now head of Gazillion Entertainment David Brevik, who



■ EA offers a range of free-to-play games alongside conventional demos on its website.



■ Android offers many paid iOS games as ad-supported free versions to combat piracy.

is currently in the midst of developing a big-budget free-to-play MMO, *Marvel Heroes*. For Brevik, the free-to-play model has proven nothing but a completely liberating opportunity as a creative. "I've always had this dream that if I could somehow support my family and give away my games for free, that is what I'd love to do," the *Diablo* developer ebulliently exclaims. "I can't tell you how many times I've paid $60 for a game and played it for 15 minutes because I didn't enjoy it. Having the ability to really play a game all the way through for free and have the ability to become engrossed before you have to pay is great. But being able to experience the game without having to pay anything… I like to think that's the better model for the gamer in general. To finally be able to convince people this is the right model is kind of a dream come true."

Marvel Heroes, of course, has the vastness of the Marvel universe and its fan base to entice players into the experience, but there's still an inherent risk in developing a free-to-play MMO without gameplay restrictions. "You will be able to play through the entire game without paying any money at all," Brevik confirms. "There are microtransactions, but most of the stuff we're doing will just enhance your experience. It's not like you'll have to pay to get past the level cap or pay to access different areas. Those kinds of things are off the table."

> **"I THINK FREE-TO-PLAY is still in its infancy, so everyone is still figuring out what is the right model for this. One of the things we've been very keen to avoid is to put in any kind of hard gate or feature that requires you to spend money. We've got to work with our community to find out what items they are willing to pay for. Having that communication is key to getting a lasting free-to-play environment that won't just [make] everyone realise you're scamming them. You don't want to do that. There are no situations where you have to spend money, and we know that because we had eight weeks where we didn't have payment in there. That's the key to free-to-play."**
>
> Rune Vendler, Gameglobe

The importance of in-game purchases cannot be overstated, forming the bread and butter of the free-to-play model. The paradigm set within the MMO genre is certainly kinder than that of social games and mobile titles, fixed on providing vanity products rather than anything game-breaking or likely to skew the balance. It's certainly easier for a game like *Marvel Heroes* to offer this type of cash-for-crap incentive with its decades of alternate skins to rifle through. However, for other games that rely on microtransactions to sustain longevity, it proves far more challenging, especially when audiences are become increasingly jaded by pay-to-win cash grabs.

"I think really you have to set out a very clear policy in the beginning and uphold that policy," says ArenaNet's Mike O'Brien, days after *Guild Wars 2* launched worldwide. "When we announced how microtransactions would work in *Guild Wars 2*, I laid out a very clear criteria. Number one: you bought *Guild Wars 2*, so you deserve to have bought a complete game. Number two: we're not allowing *Guild Wars 2* to be pay-to-win. It's okay that some players can spend time and some players can spend money instead, but it's not okay that players who spend money have an advantage over those that just spend time. Those are our two guiding principles that we hold true to and we hold up as a litmus test for everything we do. There are so many free-to-play games – and some don't hold true to those principles – that I think people come with scepticism."

Guild Wars 2 differs slightly from the typical free-to-play format. The MMO has a retail value but lacks a subscription service, with sustained revenue accrued through the aforementioned microtransactions in the game. "Microtransactions are all about putting your money where your mouth is," O'Brien suggests. "I think you can't focus on offering players a great microtransaction experience. It's about offering players a great experience, and then you have a clear relationship with them. From there you can communicate about the things we're going to deliver in the game as additional microtransactions and why it's good for them and good for the game. As a developer, if you focus first and foremost on what people are going to love, that's how you can keep generating new microtransactions that you think people will participate in."

It's abundantly clear that there's an audience with an insatiable appetite for free-to-play, but it remains to be seen how dominant a model it will prove to be. It has reshaped the MMO genre, set up residency as the prevalent social gaming structure, and has its sights firmly set on the triple-A experience.

It's not just about the opportunities it offers developers and publishers, but how the consumer is interpreting value. It's a notion that stretches beyond free-to-play, affecting the digital realm, social gaming, iOS and the traditional console experience. Can we expect *Call Of Duty*, *Battlefield* and even *Mario* to go free-to-play in the coming years, or will publishers continue to offer supplementary experiences like *Battlefield Heroes* to appease the free-to-play demand? There is no clear answer, but Devolver Digital's Graeme Struthers predicts a monumental change just around the corner.

"It needs to be about getting closer to what consumers are happy to pay, and intuitively that would be heading away from free-to-play," he declares. "The traditional games model of pushing product into retail has just gone off a cliff. The EAs and Activisions are already mentally in the digital world, but I don't think they're going to come out and say, 'Here's our game for free and buy more content.' When we look back on 2012, it will be considered a pivotal year in the games industry."



Assassin's Creed III

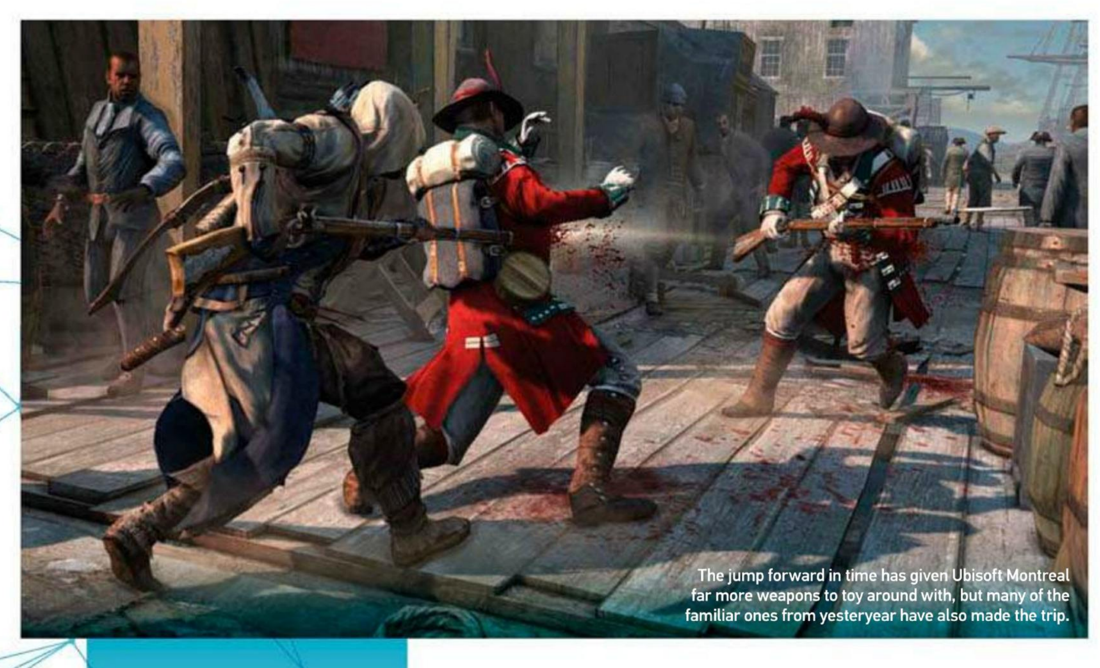
The Killing Game

Is it the last revolution or a genuine evolution as Assassin's Creed III leads the franchise in new directions while potentially wrapping up the Desmond storyline once and for all

***Call Of Duty* may lay claim to being** the king of videogames, but *Assassin's Creed* is not far behind. Proving that the yearly model has plenty of relevance with the right audience, it has become one of the few franchises to dare release in the competitive end-of-year market. With the third attempt – in terms of titles, anyway – *Assassin's Creed* is looking to veer off in a different direction, slowly leaving behind some of the previous threads before embracing a dozen new ones.

"I think we've got better at planning long-term, and I think if we want the franchise to go on and continue to be successful – which we obviously do – then we have to take a leaf out of TV history and how things can end," *Assassin's Creed III*'s creative director Alex Hutchinson tells **games™**. "It's okay for plotlines to end, for characters to end. We don't have to end the franchise. Games, I think, can associate a character with a franchise, and I don't think these things go together. You see more and





The jump forward in time has given Ubisoft Montreal far more weapons to toy around with, but many of the familiar ones from yesteryear have also made the trip.





"ASSASSIN'S CREED III SEEMS TO HAVE TAKEN A HUGE STEP FORWARD IN THE COMBAT STAKES"

more of it too, whether it's *Final Fantasy*, *Call Of Duty* or *Assassin's Creed*. They're franchises that have a set of core values that can live on for a long time with new settings and new characters, so yes, there's a lot of storylines we want to start wrapping up."

Ultimately, this seems to be a hint at bringing the Desmond narrative, which has constantly divided the series' loyal fan base down the middle, to an end. Don't be too surprised to see him walk off into the sunset when *Assassin's Creed III* draws to a close.

A lot has changed in gaming since *Assassin's Creed* hit the scene. In particular, the arrival of Rocksteady's *Arkham* games redefined what could be done with 3D combat. One of the keys to those games' combat was how the Caped Crusader could transition from character to character, turning stilted fights into smooth, cinematic spectacles that are fun both to watch and to play through.

Assassin's Creed III seems to have taken a huge step forward in the combat stakes, particularly in terms of unique animations that blend into each other during battles. You can now weave between enemies, much like in the *Arkham* titles, allowing you to put together one long, deadly sequence of moves rather than having events broken up into a series of fights and animations. Connor rolls over bayonet swipes, spins around attacks and has plenty of finishing moves, such as using his hatchet to slit throats or wedge the sharp end into a soldier's ribcage.

Connor's arsenal is impressive. He has a tomahawk, a bow and a rope dart, the latter of which can be used to hang soldiers from trees or draw them in close, Scorpion-style, allowing you a free attack while they stagger inwards. There have also been shots showing Connor with a sword at his side and musket on his back. This combat is brutal but unapologetically so – this is a deliberate attempt to reflect the warfare of the era.

So it's a new fighting system with all-new animations, which is perhaps just as well given there is now 30 hours of



Stormy weather
The AnvilNext engine transforms tranquil seas into a pounding storm in a matter of moments.

Minor issue
It's not just other ships that Connor has to contend with. Mines are scattered across the sea.



Master and commander
Connor's dual heritage has enabled him to take command of one of the ships.



Firepower
An array of cannons can be commanded to bombard any attacking enemy ships.

Attack!
Connor can ram his ship into an enemy vessel and board to seize control of the ship.

NAVAL WARFARE How Assassin's Creed III is taking the action to the sea

One of the new gameplay elements will be naval warfare, which won't be tacked on as a mini-game. Rather, it will be integral to the gameplay and has been developed by Ubisoft Shanghai, where more manpower can be committed to getting it right.

Dynamic weather will play a big part in fighting on the high seas, with calm waters becoming raging storms with little warning. This makes navigating harder but also changes the combat, as you can lose sight of enemies behind large waves.

Different types of cannon shot include round shot (standard cannonball fire), chainshot (to bring down masts) and grape shot (where the crew scrapes rubbish off the deck and fires it at the enemy). You have to assassinate Templars on other ships, so choosing the right shot is a big part of that.

It's not just ship-versus-ship either. As part of your sea adventuring, you'll have to take on man-o-wars, and safely pick your way through enemy minefields. Ubisoft is committed to making this work and, so far, it seems as though it can pull it off.



A NEW FRONTIER

The ways in which Assassin's Creed III reinvents the franchise

Historical accuracy

Ubisoft Montreal aimed to remain historically accurate throughout development. This included consulting with Mohawk experts. "We wanted to have a [Mohawk] tribal elder character and we did the misogynist thing," says Stephen Masters, the game's lead designer. "[We] assumed it was a man, but it turned out it was a matriarchal society and their elder was a woman. We were like, 'Oh shit, we've got to redefine that character.'"

Treetop navigation

Ubisoft Montreal's AnvilNext engine has drastically improved the flow of navigation. This isn't better exemplified than in the treetop running, where Connor effortlessly bounds from frail branch to bulky trunk as he explores the expansive frontier in style. It took the animators, engineers and world designers years to perfect the organic nature of the mechanic.

A cut above

The blend of stealth and action has been the calling card of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise to date, and Ubisoft Montreal has tried to make combat slicker in the third entry. Connor's movements are more lithe, springing from one enemy to the next with haste.

Travel plans

Such is the unprecedented scale of *Assassin's Creed III* that you'll find yourself fast travelling between locations to reach missions faster, rather than walking or riding horseback. Although you'd probably rather absorb the majesty of the environment and interact with the various people and creatures you come across on the road.

This time it's war

Being set within the American Revolution, one of the most impressive facets of *Assassin's Creed III*'s design is how Connor will interact with large-scale battles. "You see a couple of thousand people on the screen at the same time," says Masters. "The magnitude of that is bigger than anything we've been able to do before. It's pretty amazing."

THE HANDHELD LIBERATION

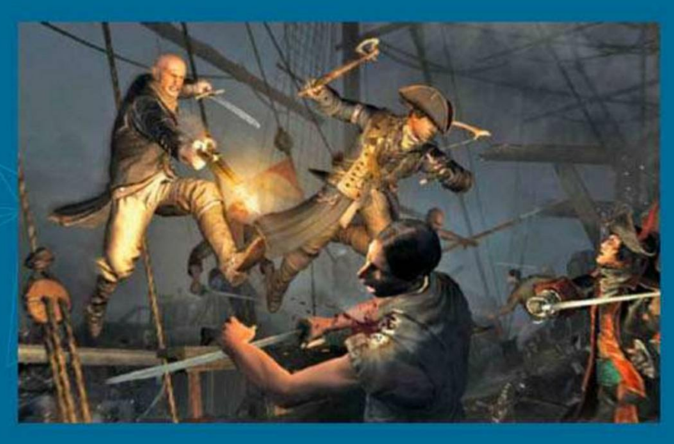


Assassin's Creed III: Liberation producer Martin Capel talks to games™ about utilising the AnvilNext engine, the New Orleans setting and bringing the franchise to Sony's handheld

What have been the challenges in transporting the themes and ideas from *Assassin's Creed III* over to the PS Vita spin-off?
Assassin's Creed III: Liberation is a very different game from *Assassin's Creed III*. We've got a new story, a new setting and a new Assassin character, Aveline – the first female protagonist of the series. We do share the same AnvilNext engine with *Assassin's Creed III* underneath, which has allowed us to make use of the innovations, new inventions and features they've brought to *Assassin's Creed III*. So it's based on the latest technology but a whole new *Assassin's Creed* experience.

How have you approached *Assassin's Creed* as a handheld title? Is it designed towards shorter play times or is it a traditional experience in an expansive sense?
The Vita is a very capable machine. We've worked closely with both Ubisoft Montreal and Sony during development and it has allowed us to bring the *Assassin's Creed* core gameplay and values to the Vita without any compromises. In terms of gameplay, we've scaled the missions so they're much more built around on-the-go gaming, but again this is entirely up to you as the player. You can sit down and play a couple of missions while you're mobile, or you can sit down and explore the open world. We've left it to the player's choice in terms of scope. The game will give an *Assassin's Creed* player familiar with the game around 15 hours of gameplay and around 20 hours for someone who is new to the brand.

Aveline is a progressive figure in the saga. Was it always the plan to introduce a female protagonist in *Liberation*?
We always like to say that we didn't invent her but she was there waiting to be discovered. This was something



we uncovered through research in New Orleans, which was a setting we decided on early in the project. It's a French city, and one of the things they had there was this system of plaçage, where basically they couldn't encourage enough women to move from Europe to the New World, so they set up this temporary form of marriage. Aveline's father is a wealthy French merchant and takes an African slave as a bride, and Aveline is the result of that temporary union. Her father loves her and decides to educate and raise her as a lady, so Aveline is very much part of the New Orleans society. She was born there, she's raised there, the neighbours know her. We found these people quite inspirational. So it was like, 'Here we have reference, here we have women who are empowered, totally confident and very strong in their character.' This is an Assassin. She's the equal of any man. Very firm in her mind in what she wants to do but very caught in the middle of having a white father from the Old World and a slave mother. She's dragged down the middle and she's caught in a world of contrasts.

Have you faced any issues adapting the gameplay mechanics for the Vita?
Because we've taken most of the mechanics away from *Assassin's Creed III*, and worked with that team very closely, we haven't faced issues in that ourselves. Also, we've introduced our own features and mechanics for *Liberation*, such as the persona system – with the Assassin, slave and lady. These [features] were something that we started developing a long time ago and [took] through a series of steps to check with ourselves and the team in Montreal. In that respect, it has actually been a very good process of bringing both *Assassin's Creed III* to Vita and our own features in.

The Montreal team has been working on *Assassin's Creed III* for nearly three years. Has the development of *Liberation* been similarly arduous?
Any *Assassin's Creed* is a big project, but by working together it makes big scope and big ambitions much more achievable. One example I can give for *Liberation* is that we had to change animations. Because we've had all male characters up until now, we needed to address the fact that Aveline, being a female, moves differently. [We started from scratch] and by working together with the Montreal guys, we followed their methodology, so we were able to bring this to *Liberation*. They are big projects, with huge worlds, fantastic stories, intense animations and everything. By working together, it makes it much more manageable.

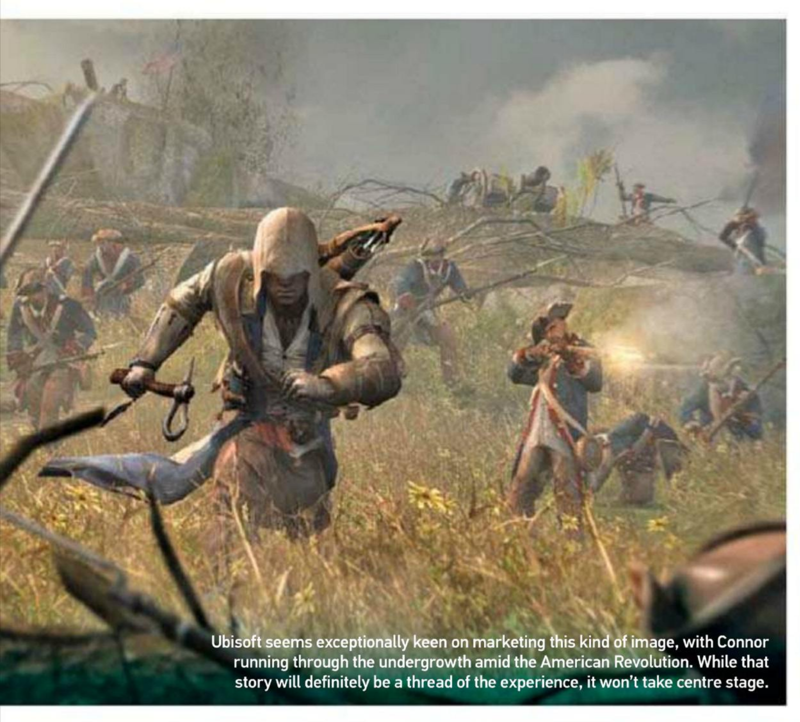


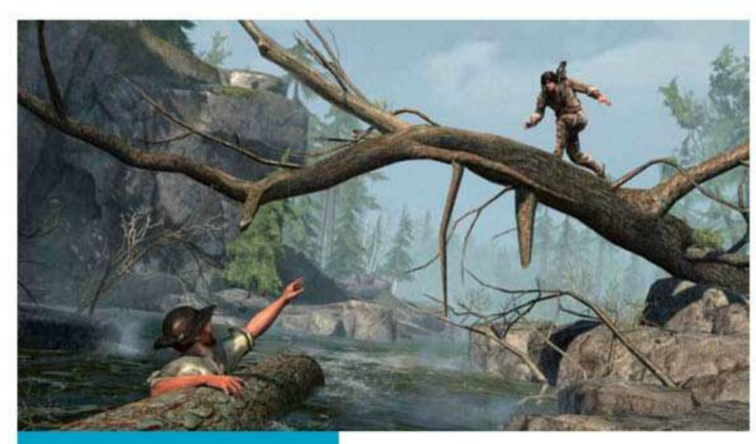
gameplay to get through. The PS3 version has 60 minutes of exclusive content, coming in the form of four additional side missions centred on the defecting general Benedict Arnold, though they're not critical to the overall story. The new fighting system is something that has been enabled by AnvilNext, Ubisoft's new engine designed specifically for *Assassin's Creed III*, despite the end being in sight for current-gen consoles.

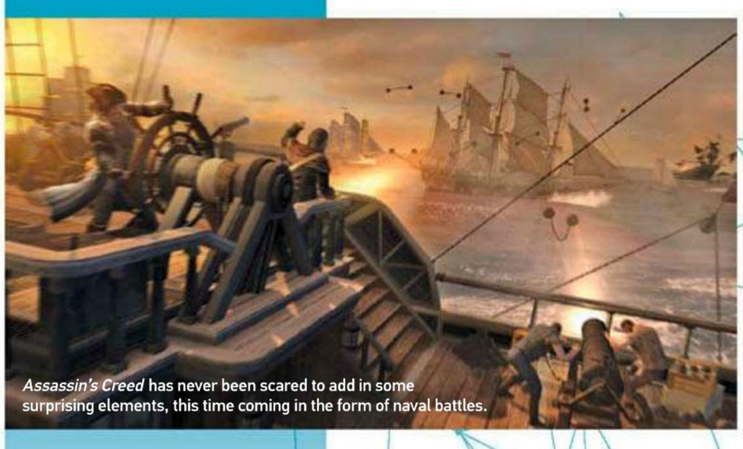
"At this point in a hardware cycle, the new engine is mostly about gameplay, which is really exciting," Hutchinson tells us. "We're not necessarily, although in some areas we are, it's not about pushing more polygons or upping the resolution. It's more about can we enable more types of gameplay, and obviously we have a new navigation system, a new fight engine built from the ground up, we've worked on crowd a lot – we can now get 2,000 characters on screen. We worked a lot on if we have new tech, how does that affect gameplay, and in that respect it's been great to have a new tools."

Surprisingly, Hutchinson also explains that although the focus of the new engine was for *Assassin's Creed III* this is the tech that could see in the next-gen: "I definitely think many of the features will transfer to next gen, and everyone has one eye on next gen now, as we know the hardware is coming. Everyone is trying to get future-ready. This engine was specifically built for *ACIII*, though. I'm sure it will go forward, but this was made for this game."

One obvious area of weakness for the series is multiplayer. Introduced with *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, the mode offers a refreshingly different variety of gameplay to single-player – think *Splinter Cell* and how that served up a


Ubisoft seems exceptionally keen on marketing this kind of image, with Connor running through the undergrowth amid the American Revolution. While that story will definitely be a thread of the experience, it won't take centre stage.




Assassin's Creed has never been scared to add in some surprising elements, this time coming in the form of naval battles.



brand new Spies vs Mercs slant to those playing online – yet it's not perfect. In fact, following *Assassin's Creed Revelations*, some might argue it's deeply flawed, as gameplay tended to boil down to a stun, smoke, stun, smoke, stun, smoke pattern that even became the de facto way of playing for veterans. Ubisoft, though, has high hopes for the tweaks it's made to multiplayer in this instalment.

Obviously there's more to Connor's debut than just what's happening in the present day, mainly in how Ubisoft Montreal is dealing with the American Revolution. The developer has always created a predicament for itself by constantly having historical settings propping up its adventure, and *Assassin's Creed III*'s could, arguably, be one of the more difficult, not to mention controversial, to depict. Hutchinson continues: "When we first announced [the setting], a lot of people were like, 'Oh, you're just doing it to capture the American audience.' But the more they thought about it, it was like, 'Hang on… There's danger here as well.' We just try really hard to remain objective and not put words in people's mouths that they didn't actually say. So while it's set in the American Revolution, it's not the story of the American Revolution – that's the backdrop. So as much as possible we keep the history accurate, we let them speak for themselves, with the characters based on letters they sent to each other and historical documents. There are some things in there that will raise some eyebrows, but I can promise you there's a lot of historical evidence if people want to argue with us."

As usual, it's high-end stuff from the Canadian studio, trying to fuse accessible triple-A gameplay with a certain dosage of reality that allows it to boast a little more weight. In this instance, too, Ubisoft has gone a touch further by trying to be much more creative with its lead character and overcome a much bigger challenge. "We try very hard to be progressive," Hutchinson explains. "We think we have a role to play in presenting new types of heroes for new audiences, and I was very excited about having a Native American lead character in a massive blockbuster. Our goal wasn't to present him as a guy who's just about being Native American. He is Native American, but his story is about the Assassins and the story of his life. Hopefully people see how hard we tried to be earnest about this and they get a real taste of authenticity with it."

"SOME THINGS WILL RAISE EYEBROWS, BUT I CAN PROMISE YOU THERE'S A LOT OF HISTORICAL EVIDENCE"

COME TOGETHER

Multiplayer was a pleasant addition to the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, even if it never hit its stride as Ubisoft first imagined. Thankfully, the team hasn't given up, introducing a revised version for *ACIII*. Hutchinson believes the Montreal team has now stepped it up. "I think any multiplayer mode is iterative and you grind away on it. With single-player, you have these big moments where you make radical changes, but with multiplayer you're really fine-tuning it. It's almost a weird collaboration between developers and players, and you're trying to find what they do, give them more of that, take out the things that have been frustrating people. This time we have been trying to add more narrative to it, more reason for long-term play. I think it's easily the best one yet."



games™ sits down with the head of Team Ninja, Yosuke Hayashi, to investigate the fighting genre, Call Of Duty, Dead Or Alive 5, and having the cutest girls in gaming

Alive Again

Such is the gap between *Dead Or Alive* games, there's every chance many individuals who now enjoy our favourite pastime have come to gaming during the franchise's interim period. Safe to say, many may have no idea it even exists. While there have been spin-offs or smaller projects, the team responsible for *Dead Or Alive 4* on the 360 disbanded after its release, secure in the knowledge that the genre it laid claim to had seen better days.

"After we finished *Dead Or Alive 4*, the team actually split up completely," Team Ninja's head, Yosuke Hayashi, tells **games™**. "Everyone went their own way doing their own projects. After *DOA4*, we didn't really know where the fighting genre was headed in the industry so we wanted to put a halt to the series. After the big boom of fighting games came back, we really wanted to get in there and be a part of that group. Take the fight to other fighters since the genre was blooming."

While true, this boom that Hayashi speaks of has been occurring for the last few years, raising the question of why Team Ninja didn't leap right on the bandwagon. It could even be argued that the dwindling sales meeting *Street Fighter X Tekken* highlight a potential dip that fighters could be about to suffer. Naturally, this may be a reaction to an over-saturation of Capcom's franchise; Team Ninja hopes to avoid genre fatigue with a host of new ideas. Hayashi continues: "When we realised we wanted to get back, we sat down and thought about the concept and the direction we could take *DOA5* in, and obviously we had to go above and beyond the previous iterations. We sat down and we came up with the fighting entertainment concept – we thought it was not only something that could propel the series forward but also show a path forward to other fighting games – kind of an evolution of fighting games. We also wanted *DOA5* to have a much better fighting system and obviously have it really compatible for online gaming as well. So, with this new concept we wanted to

get the technical system deeper and the broader appeal wider to make sure the game not only looks good for people watching, make sure they get excited, but the people actually playing the game."

From everything the developer has released so far, it certainly seems like this is the case, especially with regard to the creation that Team Ninja has dubbed "fighting entertainment". More a design philosophy than a specific element of the experience, it's the studio's way of trying to ensure every avenue that's on offer is as well implemented and enjoyable as it can be, including the franchise's staple: its cast of characters.

"We haven't really changed our stance towards that," Hayashi explains. "I think it might seem like we took a step back because we're also focusing on bringing out the other elements like the online and the core fighting system. I think naturally people have swerved towards that rather than just looking at the property of our ladies, but one of our concepts in the game is to make the cutest girls in gaming. When we remodelled and refined the characters, we aimed to make sure our girls are the hottest out there. Since we've been away and coming back into this generation, we tried to design our characters to be a little more modern so they fit in with this generation. We definitely haven't got weak in that area. [laughs] We still have it, I think..."



"The DOA series started because of VF. It's like the father of 3D fighting games"

There are few, if any, who would suggest that the fighting genre's rebirth was a negative, but it does require developers entering into it to do more than just revise an old template. Such decisions will only relegate fighting games back into the shadows. Team Ninja seems more than aware of this, promising an evolution in *Dead Or Alive*'s foundations while taking significant steps forward thanks to new technology. Outside of all this, however, and what has grasped many a fighting fan's attention, is *Dead Or Alive*'s new-found association with *Virtua Fighter*. Announcing that a selection of AM2's characters would make their way across, *DOA* instantly had a new, and intriguing, string to its bow.



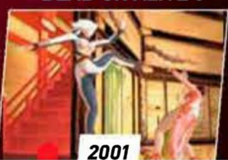
How fighting, ninjas and fighting ninjas have shaped Team Ninja's output

DEAD OR ALIVE



1996

DEAD OR ALIVE 3



2001

DEAD OR ALIVE ULTIMATE



2004

DEAD OR ALIVE 4



2005

DEAD OR ALIVE XTREME 2



2006

2000



DEAD OR ALIVE 2

2003



DEAD OR ALIVE XTREME BEACH VOLLEYBALL

2004



NINJA GAIDEN

2005



NINJA GAIDEN BLACK

2007



NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA



■ *DOA5* is the first proper instalment in the series since Tomonobu Itagaki's departure from Team Ninja in 2008.

"The *DOA* series started because of *Virtua Fighter*," Hayashi describes. "It's like the father of 3D fighting games, so we're really happy we have this collaboration with Sega and the series. When we decided we wanted to have *Virtua Fighter* characters in *Dead Or Alive 5*, we got the models, the frame data and the moves from AM2. As soon as the characters started moving, we called them over to check everything. They're really particular in how we made the characters, whether that was the modelling, the frame data, the moves… Their two head guys came down, tried the game and were like, 'No, this technique shouldn't be here, change this,' so it was almost like a collaborative development as well in a sense. They really almost directed us about how they wanted their characters in the game, which was great for us because it was the first time we dealt so closely with an outside developer. It was a great experience."

Ultimately, such a pairing instantly suggests that the two franchises may unite officially, such as the aforementioned *Street Fighter X Tekken*, a path the company's head has already considered. "I think if the fan base would really want it then we would think about doing it," hints Hayashi. "With *Dead Or Alive 5*, we did experiment with these *Virtua Fighter* characters almost as if we'd ported them over. We tried to mix and match both worlds in their pure form. If you look at *SF X Tekken*, you would have to make an engine and a core system that matches both games. For example, *DOA* and *VF*, if it were to have a proper collaboration, you'd have to look at the game system first and redesign that in order to match all the characters evenly."

Regardless how the developer, its fans or well-versed gamers look at the situation, *Dead Or Alive* is a returning franchise, and one that has been lying dormant. Until *Dimensions*' arrival on the 3DS last year, a game that Hayashi openly admits was seen internally as the restarting of the series, the lasting memory of these games is their unique range of combatants. For Hayashi, this absence has only been positive. "I think it's a good thing we've been away for so long, as that absence has almost given us an opportunity to evolve and improve the series, more so than we



Ninja Guide 'em

■ *AFTER THE slightly disappointing Ninja Gaiden 3, a new version is headed to the Wii U, complete with the Razor's Edge rebranding. For Hayashi, this is far more than just releasing the game on another console: "[Well]… it is more violent! [laughs] When we released Ninja Gaiden 3 on 360 and PS3, we got a lot of mixed results from the game. We tried to do something new with the series and we split up opinions from the game. People who came new to the series, it seemed their opinions and reviews were a lot higher than the actual fans. We kind of alienated the fans a little bit with 3 because of the new direction and challenges we tried with the series. We wanted to give fans something back for leaving them out a little bit, so Razor's Edge is the first thing to try and do that. Whether that be violence or weapons or whatever, we're giving it a lot of fan service. This is the first step, but in the future we'd like to return to the 360 and PS3 fans who may have felt left out as well."*

NINJA GAIDEN: DRAGON SWORD 2008



NINJA GAIDEN II 2008

NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA 2 2009



DEAD OR ALIVE PARADISE 2010



METROID: OTHER M 2010



DEAD OR ALIVE: DIMENSIONS 2011



NINJA GAIDEN 3 2012



NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA PLUS 2012



THE PATH OF NI-OH

■ After it was announced all the way back in 2004, the whereabouts of the historical action game have started to become somewhat hazy. It began life at Koei before the merger with Tecmo, and development was handed over to Team Ninja, which remains quite tight-lipped about the project.

"We got up to the alpha stage and we didn't feel confident about it," Hayashi tells us. "We're kind of looking at it right now – doing a bit of trial and error – but we're not 100 per cent happy with what we have. We're looking at how we can improve, and we're not planning on showing it at the moment. We're still tweaking it quite a lot."





When Duty Calls

Japan is one territory where Call Of Duty's invasion is being resisted…

■ *CALL OF DUTY: MODERN Warfare 3* has sold well in excess of 20 million units worldwide. In Japan, however, rough figures suggest it has sold around half a million copies. Certainly not terrible for a territory that isn't known for its love of first-person shooters, but an interesting statistic when you consider just how popular the franchise is in the West. Hayashi has his own ideas: "*COD* is definitely not as big in Japan. You won't see it on the main shelf in stores all year round. I think, obviously in terms of quality, it's very well done – there's no doubting that. A lot of Japanese developers are actually learning a lot from it. The biggest difference, and I think the reason it's not as popular, is it seems very unnatural for Japanese people to shoot guns. It's not socially linked at all and is very distant in that sense. The notion and the nature of guns for Japanese people… They don't really understand it very well. You can never make that connection with the game. It's why FPSs aren't that big [in Japan]. As I said, the developers in Japan are inspired by it and are trying to use elements in their own games, not just shooters. Honestly speaking, when we come [to the UK] and we take a look at stores it feels a bit sad to see *Call Of Duty* on the shelf for a whole year. Every year you have a *COD* and it's a little unfortunate that the market is too saturated with the series…"

"COD is definitely not as big in Japan. You won't see it on the main shelf in stores all year round"



could have if we had released the game almost immediately after *DOA4*. If you look at some elements in the game, like the dynamic stages and stuff breaking, shattering and the whole integration of the physics engine and the presentation of the stage, I think that's one of the biggest elements that inspired us because of the changes in game design since we've been away. We also have Facebook integration in the game, which wouldn't have been possible six or seven years ago because Facebook wasn't around back then. It's things like this and changes in gaming, new trends, that allowed us to do the necessary advancements in the series."



If we were to turn back the clock to *Dead Or Alive 4*, or many other fighting games at the time, it was the simultaneous excitement and almost instant disappointment of how internet connections were implemented that disheartened many a gamer. Fighting games had already started to lose their way, so the realisation that the biggest addition to the format resulted in the eradication of smooth gameplay, and any fun you could hope to extract from the experience, was a cruel blow to suffer. As technology has improved, though, there's no excuse not to ensure that online play works as the audience demands.

"I think you definitely have to always look at changing and advancing the game in order to keep the flow going as it is right now," Hayashi weighs in. "There's two main things you have to look at: the game design itself and the connection and communication between people. The game design… you have to keep that core fighting experience, but you have to look at how you can actually advance it. You have to look at that all the time. At the same time, this connection element – if you look at the internet in the Nineties, it was just starting to expand and fighting games got on that wave and kept going with the increase and the improvement of the internet infrastructure. I think that's something that will happen at the same time, as developers have to look at ways they can improve the core game design, and they'll have to depend on technology and the evolution of that. I think, going to the next generation, you'll see fighting games expand a lot more because of that advancement in tech, first and foremost. As you know, fighting games really depend on people communicating. It's two people fighting against each other so communication is really key within that. In that sense, I think you'll see improvements that fighting games can do with technology, but you'll also see what game developers can do to the game itself."

For all these good intentions, however, the thought of what has happened previously is a constant concern to anyone developing within the genre. Some circles are already worried about the mistakes of the past being revisited as more and more titles stack up on one another, with almost no room to breathe. Rather than be perturbed by such threats, however, Hayashi and Team Ninja as a whole see this as a positive, or a way to guarantee that no such situation need rear its head again. "I think the fighting game genre right now is in a really good state," says Hayashi. "First and foremost, this whole online connection – it allows players to get online straight away and just fight. There's always someone to fight against. In terms of the competitive element, it allows people to really get up there and compete with the best. It's like comparing kids playing soccer outside: they want to be the best and represent their country. It's that kind of passion or thirst for success, I think. People who want to be competitive and want to get into fighting games can aim to be the best. There's always going to be people like that and playing within that community, so fighting games are flourishing in that sense right now. As developers, it's almost our duty to make fighting games for people like that and beyond."

With the promise that the team is planning to stay on task and continue to rejuvenate the *Dead Or Alive* brand well past *DOA5*'s release, it shows a tremendous amount of faith in the genre. Team Ninja is aware of what's happened and how the future needs to be sculpted, and is more than willing to introduce ideas that, it hopes, will also inspire others. It's certainly not been the easiest road for *Dead Or Alive*, but if Team Ninja can please its fans and attract a few new converts on the way, there's nothing to suggest this won't be as successful as the brains behind it are hoping.

"One of our concepts in the game is to make the cutest girls in gaming. We aimed to make sure our girls are the hottest out there"





Team Nintendo

■ *While Other M, Team Ninja's Metroid project, didn't set the world on fire, it was certainly an interesting take on the franchise. Hayashi is keen to collaborate again, should the opportunity arise. "It was a really good project," he says, "and it was fun for us to work on. With the expertise we had at Team Ninja, we kind of helped Nintendo out in that sense. Sakamoto-san from Nintendo, his concept, we were a perfect fit to create the game. We're still in contact with Nintendo and we talk to them often and we're always talking about new and different things. There's nothing concrete, though. We haven't said we're making this or that. If we have another opportunity or another game we'd love to do it, but for us, first and foremost, we have to focus on our own IP. We want to do that first, but any other opportunity like that would be great."*



APPLE INVADES VIDEOGAMES

Rumours abound regarding Apple's future gaming plans, but the company is already making major inroads. As iPhone 5 and iOS 6 launch, games™ examines Apple's influence on gaming and asks where it will go from here...



Technological advances are framed by disruption, technology working in certain ways until better ideas eclipse the status quo. In gaming, we've time and time again seen the rise and fall of standards and models, along with occasional massive jolts, such as the shift from home computers to consoles, the rise of 3D, and the onset of so-called 'casual' gaming. In 2007, Apple released the iPhone and few gave it a second thought regarding games, but the device and its subsequent iOS siblings have had a huge effect on hardware design, culture and gaming as a whole; it's now clear we're in the midst of another upheaval.

Even during Apple's rise, many scoffed at the thought of the 'pretty computer company' taking on, let alone potentially toppling, traditional giants Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft. As Apple devices ate into core handheld markets, rivals dismissed iOS as a fad, and traditional gamers considered Apple kit incapable of enabling anyone to play 'real' games.

"Anyone who still says that is completely out of touch with current gaming," asserts artist and developer Zach Gage (*SpellTower*, *Bit Pilot*). He notes that almost all major studios now develop for the platform, along with legions of indies. "It feels like 99 per cent of the fresh IP is coming out on iOS these days – I barely use my other systems any more."

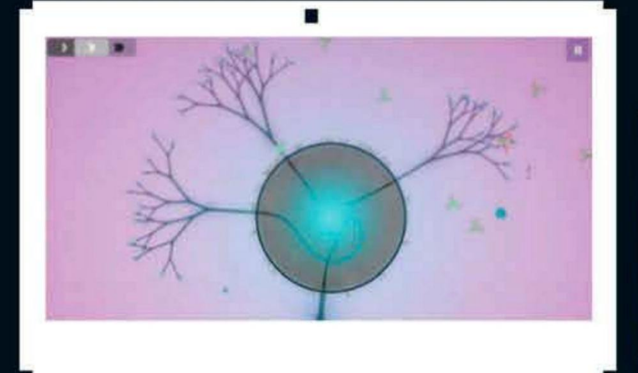
Rami Ismail of Vlambeer (*Super Crate Box*) concurs: "In fact, we're tired of people saying certain things aren't games, and people need to realise beautiful things exist on the edge of what people call videogames." iOS excels at such titles, he reckons, citing *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery*, *Gauge*, *English Country Tune* and Gage's *Bit Pilot*. And while veteran coder Ste Pickford (*Magnetic Billiards*) admits "there's a valid argument iOS doesn't lend itself to certain very popular types of games", such as big-budget triple-A titles and traditional avatar control games, he too laughs at any suggestion that the platform isn't a major force in gaming.

In a sense, this radical shift occurred through sheer ubiquity. Apple's iOS devices sold so rapidly that the platform became impossible for savvy developers to ignore. Current figures estimate over 400 million iOS devices have sold to date (over 40 million in the last quarter alone), and even the Apple TV, which can act as a conduit for sending iOS app video to an HDTV, described by the company as a "hobby", now outpaces the Xbox 360 in terms of sales. Gamers increasingly play mobile games on iOS devices rather than depending on dedicated units, but even in the home, the so-called 'second screen' is becoming widespread, with people being entertained by smartphone and tablet apps and games.

Apple's entry into gaming has shaken up a previously familiar industry pattern: a manufacturer creating a powerful console, and key developers creating killer titles for it that gamers would flock to. Instead, Apple provides a steady stream of annual updates to existing hardware, and OS and app compatibility typically stretches back a couple of generations. While some upgrades are great from a user perspective such as high-res 'Retina' displays, none are the kind of leap that an entirely new console would provide. According to Torsten Reil, CEO of NaturalMotion (*CSR Racing*, *Backbreaker*), this is precisely why gaming on iOS has "almost arisen organically"; despite the volume of devices sold over several years, Reil notes iOS provides a "very non-fragmented device base – it's essentially almost a console-like experience". However, because of the nature of how Apple releases hardware, developers aren't faced with the prospect of starting from scratch for a new generation every time Apple has a keynote.

Beyond hardware, Apple has other lessons to teach its rivals. Through the iTunes Store, Apple is estimated to have over 400 million active accounts, most with credit cards attached. Many of these existed prior to iOS devices, apps and games. "The lack of payment friction Apple provided on its platforms made a huge amount of difference to this becoming so big," says Reil, pointing out that Apple's systems offer varied options for payment, including free-to-play backed by in-app purchasing. The only sticking point for some is Apple itself, often accused by the industry of not being particularly bothered about gaming. However, even that appears to be changing. "Apple's developed tons of great features for games, and while some are rough, it's been wonderful for an indie developer like me to have access to online asynchronous multiplayer and leaderboards," says Gage. Ismail adds that he's had direct contact with Apple, calling the company "extremely helpful", and he claims whenever he's talked to people there, they've been "genuinely interested in what we say about our games and about games that friends and fellow devs have created".

Ismail's impression of Apple is it's increasingly realising that games are a big part of its ecosystem. Pickford isn't so sure: "Generally, Apple picks very safe, predictable and derivative games for big App Store promotions, which suggests a company that isn't interested in encouraging a culture of new ideas and progression within games themselves, like, say, Nintendo." He instead reckons Apple simply sees games as a useful tool to promote hardware. Interestingly, though, Pickford believes Apple being more hands-off on gaming is a key benefit for developers. "The reason we're developing for iOS, rather than any console platform or PC, is that iOS doesn't have gatekeepers in the way that the other major platforms do – even Steam. As well as the console platforms being unfriendly to indies generally, often requiring we buy expensive dev kits, or refusing developer status to indies who work from home, they all have some form of concept approval, where somebody at the platform holder decides whether or not your game is allowed to be released on their platform."





■ *iBlast Moki 2* – yet another physics puzzler, but this one features puzzles that involve rubber-duck-driven steampunk. Win!

■ Part *Galcon*, part RTS, and part trees growing on asteroids in space, *Eufloria* is an immersive title that works best close up, not on a TV.

While the concept of control by platform holders is now ingrained in the industry, it never used to be that way, and Pickford believes it has no place in a creative field. "Imagine if an author or songwriter had to get permission in advance from Amazon or Apple, before they wrote a novel or recorded a song at their own expense, in order to ensure it would be allowed to be released," he hypothesises. "That's what happens with Sony and Microsoft, and now Steam is moving from a mysterious approval process to a horrific crowd-sourced popularity contest where you need advance votes from Steam users in order to ensure your game will be allowed to be published." He argues indies want freedom to design games without limitations from marketing departments and publishers, and iOS enables that. Beyond some technical rules and content guidelines, you can publish what you wish, and update, tweak and patch post-release whenever you like.

Richard Wilson, CEO of UK industry body TIGA, thinks this shift in business models and industry relationships – developers increasingly finding fewer barriers to entry and publishing outside the traditional route – "can only be for the good", adding: "We often speak of the halcyon days of British developers in the Eighties, when we had bedroom coders developing games. In some respects, we've come full circle, but to a higher level, because the Apple network is such an attractive proposition."

The system is also advantageous to larger companies. Even high-end iOS games have cheaper development costs than triple-A console titles, and so Apple's system can provide a second revenue stream. "It's difficult for a studio to work on more than one really big triple-A game at a time," explains Paul Wedgwood, CEO of Splash Damage, which, following the release of triple-A console shooter *Brink*, made its iOS debut with *RAD Soldiers*. "We'd always wondered what the other opportunities out there might be for Splash Damage. Four years ago, everyone was talking about the rise of Xbox Live Arcade and PlayStation Network, but it never really took off in the way we all hoped." But with Apple, Wedgwood explains, it was quickly apparent that there was massive gaming potential from economic and creative standpoints.

Some will no doubt point to Wedgwood's thoughts as further proof of iOS's inability to deliver truly top-tier games, though, with major developers using iOS for fill-ins. And, after all, there's no way the underpowered hardware can complete, right? Wrong, Wedgwood retorts: "The iPhone is a really valid platform for games development, with superb graphics, audio and interface. It's a really high-quality gaming device. It's better than the N-Gage, it's better than the DS, and it's better than all of those mobile devices that came before it."

Reli agrees: "It took time for mobile devices like the iPhone to catch up to console speed, but we're now there in terms of performance." He points out Apple has continually and rapidly upped the ante on its devices' specifications, especially the iPad, which now boasts a quad-core A5X chip and 2048x1536 high-res display, and any perceived technological gaps could soon be obliterated entirely. "That



■ Indie dev Zach Gage hit the big time with *SpellTower* and thinks gamers dismissing iOS are out of touch.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF APPLE'S GAMING CAREER

Apple II
Released in 1977, this was one of the first successful home computers, thanks to its user-friendly nature and advanced features. Colour, sound and open architecture led to a boom in games. According to *Ultima* creator Richard Garriott, "The language of game creation happened on the Apple II [because it was] possible to truly master the entirety of the machine."

Apple IIGS
In 1986, the Apple II line transitioned to 16-bit architecture in the Apple IIGS. Although powerful, few exclusives appeared, instead more frequently getting ports from popular 8- and 16-bit machines of the time. It had a few firsts, though, such as *Zany Golf*, *Space Quest* and *Warlock*, before succumbing to Apple's diminishing focus on the machine.

Apple Macintosh
The IIGS never stood a chance, due to Apple pinning its hopes on the Macintosh. The nine-inch 512x384 display seemed suited to desktop publishing, but game developers married detailed graphics with mouse controls, leading to titles like *Crystal Quest* and *Shufflepuck Café*. Its market share dwindled, but it still got the odd exclusive, such as *Halo* forerunner *Marathon*.

Apple Bandai Pippin
Released in 1995, during Apple's nadir, the Pippin was a disaster. "Bad timing and architecture," explains id Software co-founder John Romero. "It was like an earlier version of what Microsoft did with the Xbox, except the architecture was bad and trying to make it more of a general-use networked computer was also a bad idea."

Reported sales: 42,000. If Apple was cool on games before...

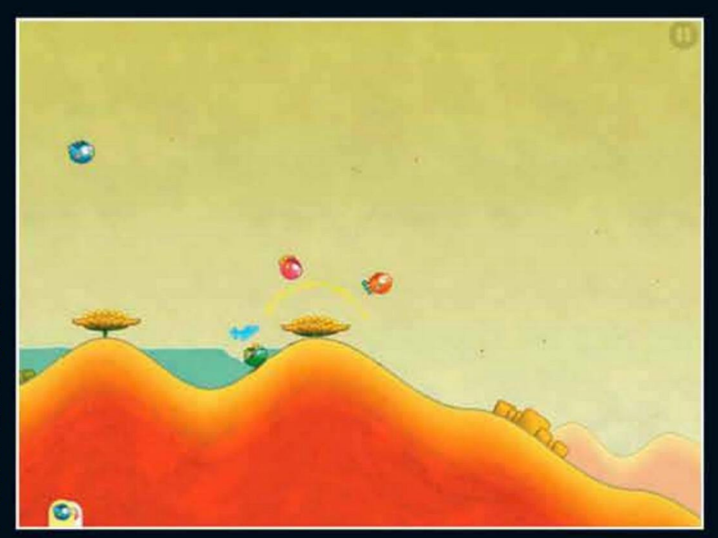
*Images courtesy of Shrine Of Apple (**shrineofapple.com**)*

whole area of thinking of scaling back and limitations is kind of gone, and it's happened extremely quickly."

As already noted, though, Apple's playing a different game to its rivals. The technical prowess of any one device isn't so important when it will inevitably be updated the following year rather than after several. Apple's vision encompasses not one device and not even two, as in its gaming rivals' recent fixation on TV and handheld integration, but almost everything it produces. We've already mentioned the iTunes Store being integral to the success of iOS, but through Apple's iCloud service, the company provides the means for seamless data sync; through Game Center and also wireless and Bluetooth, there's scope for multiplayer; with the Apple TV, video can be mirrored to any HDTV; and then there's the halo effect of its systems impacting on each other. The Mac, having long been relegated to a gaming ghetto, now has its own App Store and Game Center integration. Increasingly, app paradigms are merging across Apple's systems, although, unlike Microsoft, Apple isn't forcing a one-size-fits-all approach, but a basic sense of familiarity when you use its kit. University students increasingly plump for Macs, causing an upswing in iOS sales; kids are drawn to iOS, causing parents to consider Macs. The result: an integrated whole that from a gaming standpoint offers huge potential.

The question now is whether Apple will fully make a leap to the TV, even creating its own sets. "We've already established the way Apple has changed how games industries work by taking mobile gaming to a mass market, which has been massively disruptive, and I'm sure that's likely to continue," considers Wilson. "I think if Apple does break into the television market, gamers will obviously be able to use their TVs to play games on, which has massive implications for the console market."

But with TVs having long upgrade cycles, current suggestions point at Apple continuing with its Apple TV hobby rather than building TV sets. Pickford therefore thinks Apple gaming on a TV will remain a niche: "Touch games work best when touching the screen you're looking at, but playing on a TV usually requires physical buttons and sticks, so I don't think games will be a killer app on the Apple TV."

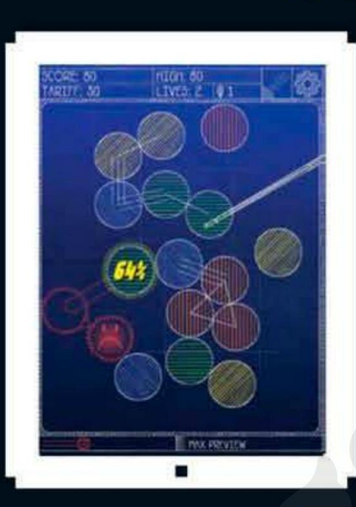


■ One-thumb endless game *Tiny Wings* sums up what many traditional gamers think is all iOS has to offer. Mind you, even if that were true – and it isn't – it's a great little game.

> **The days of thinking the living room experience and having a big screen there is superior to having a small screen in your hands are over**

Reil, meanwhile, is unconvinced that the TV even matters any more. "The days of thinking the living room experience and having a big screen there is superior to having a small screen in your hands are over," he argues. "What used to be called the first screen, the TV, is becoming the second screen, and your personal screen is going to be the first screen." Such a shift plays right into the hands of iOS, which might have problems dealing with a triple-A FPS and synchronous play, but which boasts countless immersive titles and plenty offering asynchronous multiplayer and social components.

Of course, savvy developers play to the strengths of the hardware, and although iOS has seen plenty of games with virtual D-pads and buttons, many developers have instead innovated in gestural and movement-oriented controls. Standout multitouch- and movement-based iOS originals include, respectively, *Eliss* and *Zen Bound*, and even games ported from the PC sometimes suddenly make more sense in a world of iOS multitouch and gestures, such as *World Of Goo* and *Osmos*. Even more



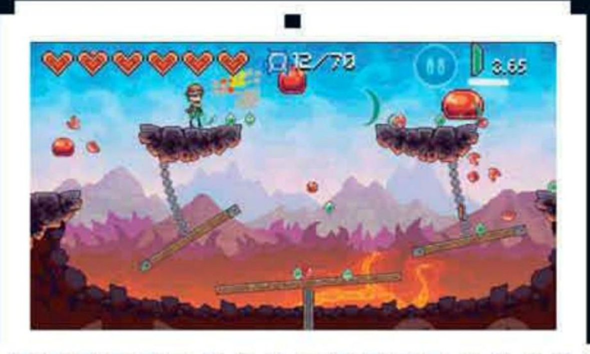
■ The excellent *Magnetic Billiards: Blueprint*, from veterans The Pickford Bros. They reckon iOS is a great platform for indies, due to the freedom it provides.

iMac
Introduced in 1998, the iMac revolutionised home computing in the sense of being something you wouldn't want to embarrassingly hide in a corner. It led to huge consumer sales and a big boost to the Mac platform's market share, and with that an increase in games development. Like the IIGS, iMac-era Macs had few exclusives, but at least they were getting PC ports again.

iPhone
Initially a surprisingly basic unit, limited to a handful of built-in apps and web apps, all bets were off when the SDK and App Store arrived with the iPhone 3G. Early successes caused an explosion of titles on the platform, and due to the unusual controls, innovation blossomed. Subsequent models have ramped up the specs, leading to astonishing handheld games that blow away the competition.

iPad
Dismissed by some as only a big iPod touch on its unveiling, the iPad was wonderful precisely because it was a big iPod touch. The same multitouch interface with a bigger screen provided extra scope for gaming, leading to dozens of excellent strategy, puzzle and board games, many of which were unique to the platform. Like the iPhone, the tech rapidly evolved, with corresponding sales.

Apple TV
The dark horse, and potentially a contender for the future. Today, the Apple TV is a conduit for sending iOS video to a TV. Few games support it fully and perceptible lag is commonplace. But we can't help thinking a generation down the line, the Apple TV could cease to become an Apple "hobby" and instead become a major component of media consumption and gaming alike.



■ Although virtual controls and console-style efforts rarely succeed, some games buck the trend, such as Everplay's *Spell Sword*.

wonder some people are still dismissive of iOS. "But triple-A-style, high-budget, deep experiences will appear on iOS as the industry better understands the strengths of the platform. That said, maybe shorter, simpler games are what people really want, but they just weren't available in the console era because the business model of consoles didn't allow them."

The quandary of gamers wanting both instant gratification and triple-A quality hasn't gone unnoticed by developers aiming to appeal to both sides of the market. NaturalMotion's procedural games animation technology, Euphoria, has been used to great effect in prominent, traditional titles like *GTA IV*, but two years ago the company realised the iPhone was fast enough to run its technology in real-time. Production values of its first iOS title therefore remained high, but the gameplay of *Backbreaker* merged triple-A quality with the kind of simpler gameplay that was more relevant for mobile.

Splash Damage took a similar approach with *RAD Soldiers*, feeling there was enough power in iOS devices to deliver triple-A quality, but through their connective and social elements, a very different kind of game could be created. "We went back to games like *Final Fantasy Tactics*, which were fantastically compelling and real thinking man's games," says Wedgwood of *RAD Soldiers*' turn-based multiplayer concept, "but they're tempered by our very successful online provision, which is very much like *Words With Friends*, where you just take a turn and play against someone else."

According to Reil, the important thing is to not create the kind of snack-based gaming that iOS is often accused of peddling. Instead, games should reward long-term dedication, but also meet the limitations of the 'Starbucks queue' test, providing a chunk of core gameplay in the time it takes to queue for a cup of coffee: "What we want in a game is an overall progression arc that can last over a month, where small bits of gameplay contribute to that.

> **Maybe shorter, simpler games are what people want, but they weren't available in the console era because of the business model**



■ One-thumb noodly games like *Orbital* might not have much depth nor dozens of hours of gameplay, but they suck you in and don't let go.

traditional fare finds itself evolving on the platform – Epic Games' *Infinity Blade* took a *Punch-Out!!*-style one-on-one brawler model but focused on swipe gestures for swordfighting, and racers use tilt to get your car around the track. There's also the pure, intuitive nature of directly interacting with content that pushes iOS onto trails once blazed by the Nintendo DS, opening up the market to a much broader audience, which subsequently impacts on games development.

The aim is to be more inclusive, but Pickford has noticed the associated effect of traditional gamers feeling alienated: "Big-budget triple-A games are technically possible, but mobile usage patterns don't suit them, nor does the dominant iOS business model of low-price games. And the lack of a controller means games where you have direct control of an on-screen avatar don't always play well – a fairly new thing, given that almost all videogames since the Seventies have involved controlling an on-screen avatar with a joystick or buttons." With so many genres and game styles built around such systems, Pickford thinks it's no

STEVE JOBS VS VIDEOGAMES

Some believed Apple's co-founder and twice CEO, Steve Jobs, was effectively anti-gaming, and only iOS's huge success softened this stance. We spoke to Leander Kahney, Cult of Mac editor and author of New York Times bestseller Inside Steve's Brain, about whether there was any truth to this

What are your impressions of Jobs, gaming and Apple?
I think he'd have loved the Mac to have been a gaming platform, but history conspired against him. Early Macs made great gaming machines with advanced graphics and mouse controls – look at *Myst* and *Marathon*. But when the Mac was eclipsed by Windows, gaming developers ignored it. Developing for a minority platform made no sense, and there were no tools to make it easy to port. The Mac suffered from the problem Android has now – there's not enough action to justify it. And so I think Jobs just ignored gaming. There was no way he could compete, so he didn't even try.

Apple's early days were built on gaming foundations with the Apple II, yet Jobs still didn't seem to care for games…
Maybe in the early days Jobs didn't give gaming the respect it deserved. He always seemed more interested in apps with a higher calling – education, graphic design, science. If you read interviews from the early days, he was more interested in building computers that made a 'dent in the universe'. Post-Apple II, gaming was also downplayed on the Mac, which was positioned as a serious machine for serious work. Perhaps this was due to early critics' charges that the Mac was a 'toy'.

Did Jobs' thoughts on gaming influence iOS? It took time before Apple publicly said the platform was great for games.
Yes, Jobs' attitude gave gaming a late start on iOS. In fact, Jobs didn't want any third-party apps on the iPhone at first – he didn't want third-party developers ruining the carefully crafted experience! His executives had to spend a lot of time persuading Jobs to approve the App Store, which then opened the floodgates. But once persuaded that iOS devices offered a unique and fun gaming experience thanks to their sensors and touch controls, he became an enthusiastic supporter.

Also, remember Jobs was an opportunist; he never looked a gift horse in the mouth. It was clear as soon as the App Store opened that iOS devices were fun gaming machines. He wasn't much of a gamer himself, but he got a kick out of the unique experiences and interfaces gaming companies crafted for iOS. There's a lot of creativity that emerged first in games, like clever use of accelerometers and gestures.



COMING ATTRACTIONS

The best iOS games on the horizon



REAL RACING 3

Real Racing was the app iOS gamers used to shove in people's faces on hearing that iOS was all fart apps and *Angry Birds* clones. The third entry in the series looks to follow its predecessors' triple-A-style leanings, with console-quality graphics, loads of on-screen cars, plenty of tracks – including real ones this time round – and AirPlay compatibility. Zooooom!



BAD HOTEL

Released in August, *Bad Hotel* is a great example of iOS devs innovating through mash-ups and not restricting a game to a single genre. Merging tower defence and a procedural music toy, *Bad Hotel* tops it off with a quirky story about you building in the territory of Tarnation Tadstock, the Texas Tyrant. Fend off an army of seagulls, rats and yetis by stacking as rapidly as possible.



BLAST-A-WAY

The catalogue of Illusion Labs includes tactile 'marble in a box' classic *Labyrinth 2*, multitouch BMX and skateboard games, and wibbly platformer *Sway*, but *Blast-A-Way* sees the studio blending action, adventure and puzzles. The game finds robot heroes on a mission to save 'boxies', wisely using bombs, colour gates and portals to do so. The previews we've seen look great and the game should be out by the time you read this.



SUPER STICKMAN GOLF 2

The original *Super Stickman Golf* took golf, threw out the boring bits like dull greens and tiresome club selection, added wackiness in its crazy courses and oddball power-ups, and further sank its claws in with a frenetic, stupidly addictive multiplayer race mode. The sequel currently looks similar to the first game, but we're told it adds a puzzle mode, asynchronous two-player through Game Center, and a ton of new features and power-ups.



SHARDLANDS

This atmospheric 3D puzzle adventure seems to typify the kind of iOS game we're increasingly seeing as Apple sees fit to ramp up the power of its iPhones and iPads. Accessible, intuitive and touch-focused gameplay, helping a traveller who's lost in a desolate alien world, is married with first-class graphics of a standard that would have been unthinkable on a handheld device just a few short years ago.



RIDICULOUS FISHING

It's been a long time coming, but Vlambeer's *Ridiculous Fishing* is reportedly imminent. Based loosely on *Radical Fishing* – where, armed with underwear, a boat and destructive weaponry, a guy partakes in the noble pastime of fishing – the game showcases two things we love about iOS as it evolves: first, that microstudios continue to put out great games; secondly, that said studios are happy to create games full of art and character.



LITTLE CONQUEST

Mobile devices are often caught between two extremes: people want games similar to those they enjoy on a PC, but they also want experiences that are fast and fulfilling. Cue *Little Conquest*, taking RTS and hitting the fast-forward button. It scratches the strategy itch, aiming to provide a deep experience but in a short amount of time, enabling you to beat up some Normans. There are three modes and online multiplayer too.



[And then we] polish and drive up the production values on that as much as we can."

In part, this requires a change in mindset for traditional gamers, but there's also the need to snare and keep people who are surrounded by thousands of affordable games. Wedgwood describes the industry like a pyramid, topped by triple-A console games, then below that PC client games, and then the likes of iOS games at the bottom. "This isn't a qualitative pyramid – it's purely related to switching cost and audience width," he explains. But if this is true, it shows by numbers alone why iOS gaming is such a powerful threat to traditional gaming. In this age, convenience rules.

While there may be gradual erosion of what gamers would consider core games in a traditional sense, assuming the kind of thinking prevalent on iOS spreads, the reality is triple-A production values remain intact, and games just shift in terms of provision. Rather than paying a lot of money for a boxed product with 60 hours of gameplay thrown in straight away, titles will increasingly become more focused, or will grow as economics allow. For publishers used to that initial glut of income, this will be a shock, thinks Reil: "The business model has changed – the dominant business model on iOS is free-to-play." Large up-front payments therefore don't work as well any more, because people "just try game after game until they find one they like".

Whether iOS guns for the TV, to directly compete with traditional consoles, reflecting what certain gamers are familiar with, or continues to organically provide a vast ecosystem is almost a moot point. Whatever happens, Apple has already transformed gaming by changing the nature of devices we play on and how games are played; iOS has pushed gestural, intuitive, multitouch interfaces, making games more accessible than even the Nintendo DS managed. The greater connectivity and the social nature of mobile devices has shifted traditionally PC-oriented multiplayer gaming into the palm of your hand, and developers are also rethinking how they approach games and charge for them.

Perhaps most importantly, Apple has ushered in an almost unparalleled era of creativity and fun in gaming. Studios more used to crafting slow-burn triple-A titles are understanding the appeal of immediacy; elsewhere, countless indies translate what's in their imaginations to the touchscreen, without a focus group in sight. Once again, one developer's vision can be enough, and such games go toe-to-toe against the likes of *Infinity Blade* and *Real Racing*. "Because of all that, you have something that's amazingly powerful as a gaming platform," considers Reil, "and I'm not sure if anything else is required on top of that."

And for Wedgwood, this sense of innovation and connectivity is not only a key differentiator for Apple but also something that should ensure the company's longer-term success in gaming: "Every game [in the past] was a generative evolution in the underlying technology [...] and so what we're seeing is generative evolution in the advancement of gameplay, which is actually what we always wanted it to be about anyway."

With annual bumps but plenty of backwards compatibility, the traditional gaming cycle is done. Focus is now on pure innovation, and not the rise and fall of limited-life hardware. This alone brings with it the promise of better games, and that is surely Apple's greatest gaming achievement.

IPHONE 5 AND IOS 6

Why Apple's incremental updates mean more for gaming than you'd think

On the surface, the release of iPhone 5 has little bearing on the future of gaming. It's just a taller, thinner phone, after all, right? But the new hardware functions, combined with the new features in iOS 6, which also runs on iPad and iPod touch, make Apple gaming more important than ever before.



Retina Display

Apple's much-celebrated Retina Display gets better with iPhone 5, boasting a four-inch display that's 9mm taller than that of iPhone 4S but, crucially, the same width so that single-handed use remains comfortable. And while the screen may be an inch smaller than that of PS Vita, the 1136x640 resolution trounces Sony's 960x544 display. Finally, the new screen technology enables touch controls without the need for a second screen layer, thereby maximising visibility and clarity like never before. The new 16:9 aspect ratio means new games and updated apps will run in cinematic widescreen, while non-updated apps will run in the centre of the screen with borders. That extra screen space opens up several possibilities, but the one we'd most like to see used is virtual controls that sit on the sides of the screen without obscuring the action.

Faster processor



The new A6 chip at the heart of iPhone 5 is smaller than the A5 used in iPhone 4S but somehow manages to be twice as fast, delivering all sorts of benefits across iOS usage, but it's games that will benefit the most. At the iPhone 5 unveiling, Rob Murray of EA demonstrated *Real Racing 3* running on the new iPhone and said that the advanced hardware enabled "full console quality". That doesn't necessarily mean console-quality gameplay, of course, but the graphical improvements, including dynamic reflections in *Real Racing*'s first rear-view mirror, have obvious benefits to play. Otherwise, the video shown demonstrates an unbelievably realistic racing game that is genuinely indistinguishable as a 'mobile' title. And while power-hungry games have traditionally caused problems on Apple devices, particularly with overheating and battery drain, that may now be a thing of the past. Apple promises that the A6 is its most efficient chip yet, and while it hasn't revealed how it copes with games, the fact that it can run ten hours of video between charges certainly bodes well for mobile gamers.





Game Center

While iOS 6 improves on Game Center in minimal ways, it's the addition of Game Center Challenges that stands to make iOS gaming an even more central part of the hardware. Asynchronous play – perhaps one of the most important functions of the digital generation – has been at its best on iOS since *Words With Friends* debuted, and has been adopted by more hardcore games like *Worms 2: Armageddon*. iOS 5's Game Center supported this kind of play on a basic level, but it will be much more formally integrated from iOS 6 onwards, drawing upon friends lists and interacting with OS X's Game Center. EA's *Real Racing 3* demo showed off the function, with its "time-shifted multiplayer" allowing players to race against their friends without being online at the same time, while Game Center Challenges were also the impetus behind the upcoming port of *Naked War* – the asynchronous *Advance Wars*-alike we gave 9/10 to back in issue 50. If Game Center's functions can attract quality titles like these to iOS then the system will only cement itself further into the hands of hardcore gamers.

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Super-fast wireless speeds



Advancing on the first steps into next-gen wireless technology in the new iPad, iPhone 5 is capable of connecting to all of the latest 4G internet standards including HSPA+, DC-HSDPA and LTE, which will translate into access speeds of up to 100Mbps. This obviously means that games will play smoother online and that apps, and in-app purchases, will download faster. We also assume that the maximum file size for downloads will increase, though that obviously depends on data contracts. As a side note, the UK's 4G network is still in its infancy. EE, T-Mobile and Orange customers currently have access to 4G in London, Birmingham, Bristol and Cardiff, with another 12 cities planned for the end of the year. Users of other networks will have to wait until the middle of 2013 for support, using standard 3G in the meantime.



AirPlay

One of the most interesting functions of iOS is AirPlay, which allows mobile content to be shared with an HDTV through a home network and Apple TV. AirPlay's Dual Screen function has the most potential for games, allowing gameplay to be displayed on the TV screen while other elements like controls and HUD run unobstructed on the mobile device. This function was present in iOS 5, of course, but with iOS 6 it looks to be more supported by developers, will come to iPod touch for the first time, and will surely benefit from the power of the iPhone 5's A6 chip, bringing its gaming potential close to other 'second screen' devices like Wii U, SmartGlass and PS3/Vita. The 16:9 display of iPhone 5 comes in handy here too, allowing streamed games to take full advantage of a widescreen HDTV.

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Reviews



88

Borderlands 2

Gearbox returns to Pandora for the only game to feature more guns than things to shoot… almost

THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.



94



100



104

AGREE/DISAGREE?

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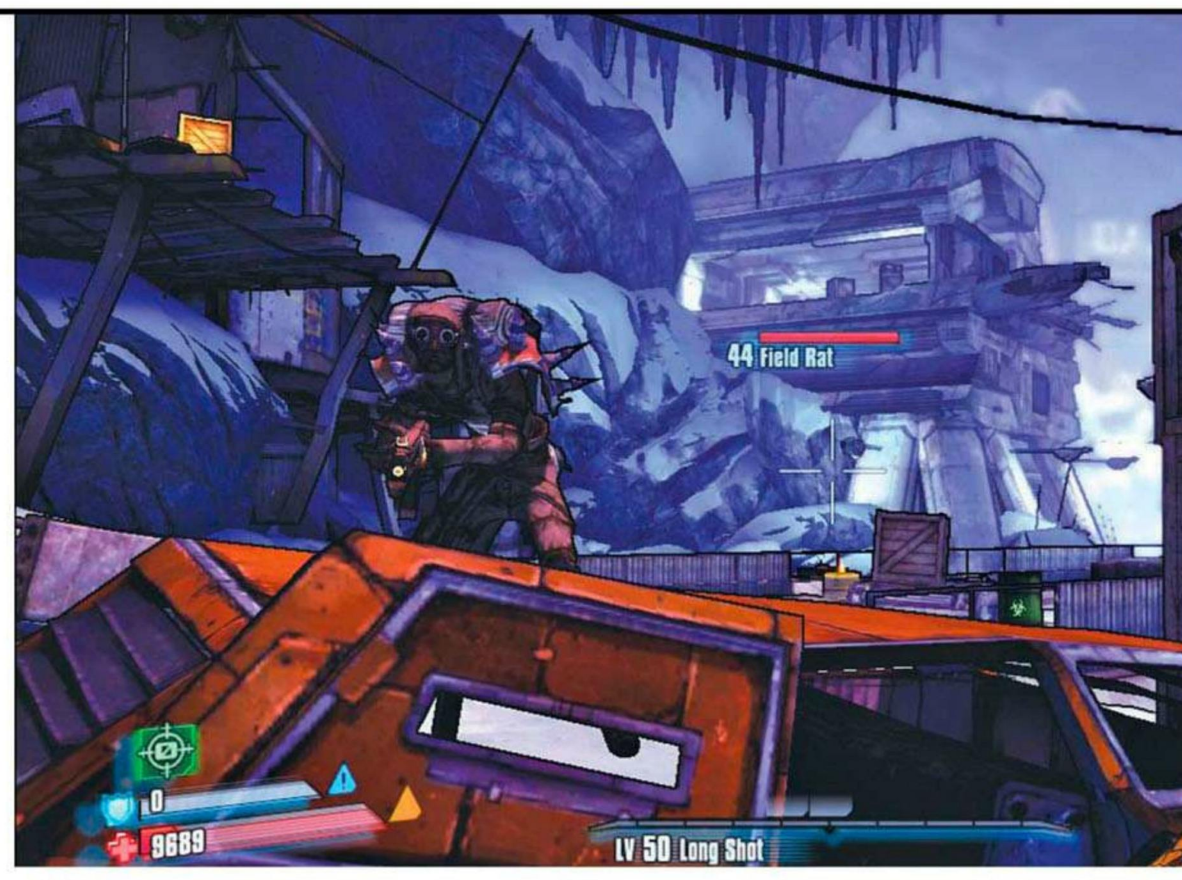
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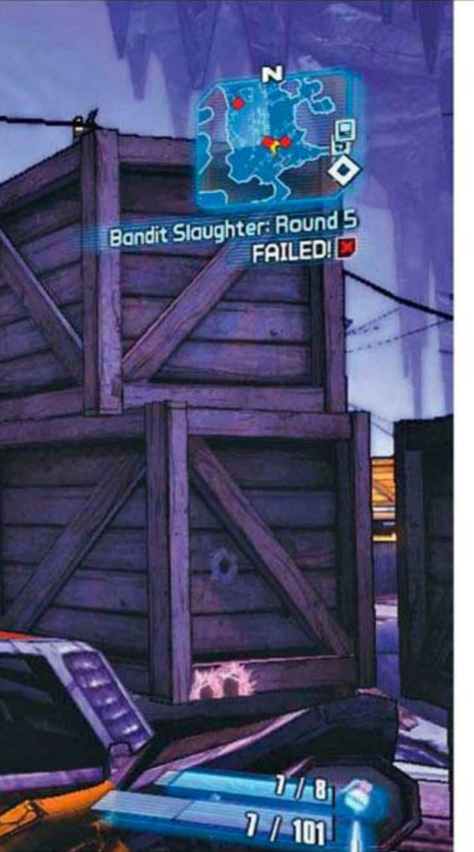
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MEDIUM RARE

One aspect of *Borderlands 2* that we declare 'fixed' since the original is item rarity. In *World Of Warcraft* – the game whose commonality colour-coding *Borderlands* borrows from – purple (epic) items might drop once in every 10,000 enemies killed. In other words, rare meant *rare*. This was important, because it afforded those items both great value and thrill factor. Purple items were kind of everywhere in *Borderlands*. In this sequel, however, they are indeed very uncommon, dropping only once in a blue moon even from some of the game's biggest bosses. One of our colleagues didn't encounter a single orange (legendary) item in his entire playthrough of the main campaign. We found two, but we played it more than Gearbox has.



Right: The Rats are a subculture of the more common bandits. They are tougher to kill primarily due to their movement patterns. Shooting them feels like trying to push repelling magnets together. You aim, they move. Cheap. And not fun



IS THAT A BAJILLION GUNS IN YOUR POCKET?

Borderlands 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: Gearbox Software
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

BORDERLANDS





WORSE THAN

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

***Borderlands 2* is a difficult game to review.** Best enjoyed co-operatively, to appraise it judiciously you have to rope in three other people to even begin. It's also a slow burner, much of its best being saved until well into its second and third acts. Also, to judge the game as a whole means completing a large portion of its hundred or so side missions.

On top of all that, *Borderlands 2* is a better game when played in True Vault Hunter mode, unlocked upon completion. It has better guns, a vast array of new enemy types, and offers a fighting chance of taking on some of Pandora's skyscraper-sized world bosses. Say what you like about *Borderlands 2*, but it's big. And for the record, we played over 100 hours of it.

But not only does *Borderlands 2*'s sheer size make it a tough review, so too do its niggles, which are as numerous as they are inconsequential. To list them here would result in four solid pages of whining that would be rather unreflective of the experience we had with it. We will, however, take a moment before the praise for a frisson of rage, included here to reflect the number of occasions when our anger leaked audibly out.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

OPTIONS: Better visuals, bigger world, better character classes, more guns. There is no way in which *Borderlands 2* is not far superior and more content-filled than its predecessor.

You see, some of *Borderlands 2*'s enemies are just plain cheap. What's that, **games™**? You mean you got killed a whole bunch by tough enemies? Noob, and so on! Yes, it's a shame that complaints vocalised as a result of a game's frustrating AI can be made the victim of a jabbing, accusatory finger that insists the complainer is just not very good at it. Especially when, as is the case here, those grievances are justified.

Around a third of *Borderlands 2*'s enemies adopt attacks and evades that are unavoidable and/or near-impossible to counter, no matter your skill level. They have been designed to harass you, evade you, disappear and frequently land on your head, sometimes killing you instantly. If you want to test your resistance to rage-quitting, some of these enemies will give you a decent run for your money. It's difficult, then? Not really, especially since anything killed before dying stays dead when you respawn. 'Difficult', as a term, implies that skilled players will succeed where unskilled players do not.

Imagine you're a 100-metre sprinter and the race organisers want to make the run from A to B more difficult. How about some cones for you to slalom around? Or some hurdles to jump? Those with more skill would be able to handle them; those with less, perhaps not. This might translate in *Borderlands 2* to adding more enemies, affording them more hit points, and so on.

What *Borderlands 2* more commonly resorts to, however, is the equivalent of lopping off your feet, setting the track on fire, throwing medicine balls at your head as you crash to the floor, and laughing loudly in your face. One could argue that, yes, these measures have made the race more difficult, but they are also as cheap as a penny chew. Not only is it frustrating, but ultimate victory has no payoff. In your heart of hearts, you know that it was more luck than judgement.

There is some text on one of the loading screens – you know, one of those 'tips' that often flash up – that neatly sums up Gearbox's attitude here. It states that you will learn to hate a certain enemy due to its behaviour. If Gearbox doesn't know that 'hate' is a bad emotion to be feeling when playing one of its games, should we really be the ones that tell it? Did nobody in QA pipe up to say, 'Uh, guys… some of these enemies seem deliberately designed to frustrate, harass and exasperate. Think we should, you know, do something about that?'

That may seem like a hefty criticism, and if you're now left to wonder why the score you see at the end of this review has come away relatively unscathed, it all comes down to a

IF YOU WANT TO TEST YOUR RESISTANCE TO RAGE-QUITTING, SOME OF THESE ENEMIES WILL GIVE YOU A DECENT RUN FOR YOUR MONEY

Below: One of a sniper's greatest pleasures is the headshot. Second only to that is the systematic dismantlement of Hyperion Loaders, the battle droids that appear in the game in countless varieties and of varying lethality. Take them apart.



Above: Fink's Slaughterhouses are a fantastic aside, allowing players to engage in wave-based survival combat. Unfathomably, these can only be attempted once per playthrough, meaning the chances of running through them in co-op are slim indeed.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

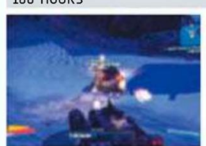
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



Our first gun. The further in you get, the more ridiculous it's going to seem that you once only had a little pop gun to your name and not an idea where you were going.

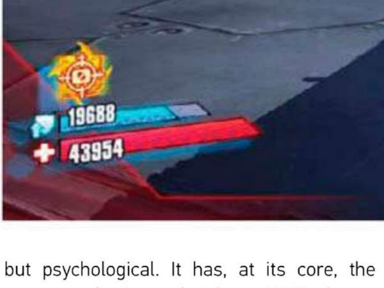
30 HOURS



No end in sight. We're still trying to get all the side missions done and not seeming to get any closer to that aim. Starting to realise the enormity of that particular task. Onward!

100 HOURS

We've beaten the game once. We did it about 50 hours ago, actually. True Vault Hunter is hella tough, but levelling is quick and the new guns are worth sticking around for.



question of scale. If we spent one hour cursing the cheapness of certain enemy types, we spent another 99 rapt in the joys of daft guns, humour, characters, locations, loot, exploration and experimentation. Pandora is just a great place to be.

It's changed a lot since the events that unfolded in the original *Borderlands*. Handsome Jack has taken ownership of the vault from which he's mined large quantities of the MacGuffin mineral, Eridium. The purple crystal possesses mysterious properties and powers the telekinetic abilities of the Sirens. Jack has become ludicrously wealthy as a result of this monopoly and built with his ill-gotten lucre a new capital city, Opportunity. Jack is a good bad guy. What we mean to say is he's a detestable sadist whose communiqués throughout your time on Pandora do more than enough to imbue actual satisfaction to the moment when you'll finally get to kill him. And his constant, humorous references to you as 'the bad guy' do little to sway this cause.

New friends, new foes, the various movements of the story, the ups and the downs all do enough to tug you along to your next objective. Ultimately, though, *Borderlands 2* doesn't really need a main story, since its primary draw is not narrative but psychological. It has, at its core, the same mechanisms that keep MMO players coming back for more, day in, day out. It has random reward.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

COME TOGETHER: Playing co-operatively is *Borderlands 2*'s preferred state of being, but the enjoyment of playing with friends is a little too reliant on all four being at a similar level.

Stick a pigeon in a cage with a button. If every hundred presses of the button delivers it food, it will keep pushing the button in the hope that at some point it will get food again. It's sad to think that we, a supposedly higher-thinking species, are just as prone to such base instinct, but it's true. We are. No matter how we try to rise above it, that ultra-rare sniper rifle that drops off some Badass Skag once in every 25 hours will keep us hitting that button until it drops again, no matter how long it takes.

Which is not so much a criticism as it is a realisation of what *Borderlands 2*, and MMOs, are doing in general. Random reward, along with iterative improvement – in this case from pea-shooter-wielding weakling to nuke-launching badass – is secreted beneath lashings of beautiful environments, frenetic gameplay and varied mission structure. But it's there, right at the core, and it allows *Borderlands 2* to punch well above its weight. It's just so difficult to put down.

Every aspect of your character receives a steady stream of upgrades. Microscopically improving stats, old guns for new. Levelling up itself provides you more health, of course,

Below: This is Ellie. Like practically all the characters in *Borderlands*, she is a chimera of American Midwest stereotypes. Y'all.





ARE YOU NOT ENTERTAINED?

One facet, enjoyable and confusing in equal measure, is *Borderlands 2*'s arena missions. Player enters arena, fends off numerous waves of attackers, leaves as victor or tries again. Why confusing, then? Well, because they are only available once. When those five missions (rounds) are done, you cannot go back and play them again. What this means is that what should be an absolute shoo-in – to be able to invite your mates for some Horde-style wave defence – cannot be done. The only way to play these with your friends is to get to that point in the game, then invite them, and even then you'll only be able to play them once. Suffice it to say we cannot fathom why the arenas are not an option available from the matchmaking screen.





Left: The Assassin's primary skill is Deception. The ability creates a decoy while disappearing, allowing time-out and backstab tactics.

Right: Second Wind is back; kill an enemy while downed to revive. Of course, when playing in co-op, players can revive one another, albeit leaving themselves exposed while they do so.



Left: This Constructor is your friend, but the arrival of one as an enemy usually marks the start of a long, tough fight. They take a beating.

and the black market store at the game's central hub, Sanctuary, furnishes the ability to upgrade the amount of ammo you can carry for each weapon type, as well as how many guns you can keep in your inventory. Then there are the class-specific skill trees.

We went Assassin class for the vast majority of our time. Being ardent fans of sniping in general, we ploughed our points into the improvement of critical sniper rifle hits – headshots, to be more blunt. Equally, we could have specialised in what can be broadly categorised as stealth or speed. There are three trees per character, and while these are largely quite sensible in their layout, some are more attractive than others. We don't know why anybody would pick the Assassin class simply to be fast. Snipers snipe.

The real game-changing abilities are the last to be unlocked within any specific tree, meaning specialisation is an imperative, not a choice. Jacks of all trades here will be master of none and, as a result, will struggle. For this reason, the three trees offered each class don't, in our opinion, offer three realistic choices. More, they offer a main tree with two in support of it, should you level beyond acquisition of one tree's final ability.

WE DON'T KNOW WHY ANYBODY WOULD PICK THE ASSASSIN CLASS SIMPLY TO BE FAST. SNIPERS SNIPE

Above: Hyperion Loaders aren't that tough to take down on their own, but things become more complicated with a bunch of these repair surveyors in the air. Crippled enemies can quickly turn once again into deadly threats.

FAQs

Q. MANY SIDE QUESTS?
They outnumber the main story quests by around five to one. Moreover, many of them are chain quests, making up mini-stories of their own.

Q. BEST CLASS?
While we insist our Assassin is the best, our friends who each have one of the others all insist theirs is superior. They're all good.

Q. BEST MOMENT?
It involves a story told by Handsome Jack as you first enter the Highlands. Something involving spoons. We won't spoil it.

As a single-player game, an enduring challenge awaits, but where *Borderlands 2* really comes into its own is as a co-operative experience, and provided all players present are at roughly the same level, that experience is excellent. But therein lies another problem. While *Borderlands 2* does a great job in allowing folks to jump in and out of your game and vice versa, it fails to offer the level playing field that would make it fun for all. If your levels are mismatched by more than three or four either way, it can only be fun for one of you.

Levels, gun damage, XP. All of these are just numbers, which means it would not have been impossible to boost or reduce the stats of players and enemies to be roughly on a par when playing together. We had assumed, until we tried it out, that that was exactly what *Borderlands 2* would do when faced with four players of fairly disparate levels. That it would prioritise fun over 'look at me' willy-waving on the part of the most levelled-up and specced-out player. Instead, all players remain exactly as they are.

The upshot is that if one player is level 44, say, and hosting a game that is joined by two players, one of level 26 and one of level 16, both those other players won't be able to damage the enemies at all and, furthermore, won't be able to use any of the loot that's dropped, since its level requirement will be too high. Conversely, if the same players joined a game hosted by the lowest-levelled player, the loot would be redundant and they would not gain any XP at all for killing stuff. It would not be fun either since everything, for that player, would be a one-shot kill. We cannot fathom what led Gearbox to work things this way, since beyond finding players who are at or around your level, there is little impetus to team up. You might as well just play on your own, where you'll always get XP and level-appropriate loot.

We also take some issue with *Borderlands 2*'s sense of humour. While it's welcome, it draws so frequently on up-to-the-minute memes that it becomes hard to remain immersed in an experience supposedly taking place in the distant future, on a remote planet, and among people who have no reason to understand the significance of an arrow in the knee. Most of it's just not that funny. It relies on people laughing in polite acknowledgement. You know, because they get that it's a riff on Batman, but not because anything funny is being said about him. It's catchphrase humour.

People who enjoyed *Borderlands* and are willing to forgive this sequel its flubs will find not just a new game in *Borderlands 2*, but something that's going to steal away time reserved for eating, say, or sleep. Conversely, those less sensitive to the addictive properties of random reward and incremental upgrade are going to find themselves more sensitive to *Borderlands 2*'s problems.

VERDICT 8/10
AN ENJOYABLE TIME SINK, BUT STOPS SHORT OF CLASSIC



TEKKEN YOU OUT ON A TAG DO

Tekken Tag Tournament 2

Above: Alex, Tiger Jackson, Jaycee and a few others have the base move sets of existing characters – Roger Jr, Eddy and Julia respectively – but have their own individual touches and tweaks to stand out and feel individual.

It's all about the character select screen. With RPGs it's the magic system and with first-person shooters it's weapons and killstreaks. But with fighting games, the first point of interest has always been about what faces will fill out the character select screen.

Putting pre-order and DLC shenanigans to one side, *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* has the biggest character select screen we've seen, one that makes you squint, trying to work out where they've put Paul. There are 50 characters in total, ranging from the return of Prototype Jack to the likes of Tiger Jackson being pushed beyond a mere palette swap. Characters have also been rebalanced, and while there's still a noticeable top tier, this time with the Mishimas having knocked Bob and Lars from the summit, there's a far healthier mid-tier presence, with no weak characters lingering at the bottom. Good news for anyone who persisted with Zafina, Kuma and Yoshimitsu through *Tekken 6*.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

The biggest difference in gameplay is the tag mechanic, which has been a trendy feature in fighting games recently, although it differs here. A big part of the strategy in *Street Fighter X Tekken* and *Marvel vs Capcom 3* is for the player to create situations for safe tagging, thus avoiding being greeted by a huge combo when the fresh player runs into the match. Yet tags in *TTT2* are so quick that it actually reverses this, making the attacking player work harder than the defender to take advantage of a desperation tag. The window to hit an incoming player is there, but it's small enough that situations where you'll be punished for tagging are the exception rather than the rule.

THIS FEELS AIMED DIRECTLY AT THE HEARTS OF FANS RATHER THAN AT THEIR WALLETS

So if partners can run in and out of the match at will, what's the point of the tag system? For combos and setups. Some moves allow you to tag out as part of the animation. Likewise, calling your partner in for more damage can extend bound moves. Learning these is key to milking extra damage from combos, which have always been the bread and butter of *Tekken*'s appeal. You can also get creative, calling in your partner for an attack mid-combo while you set up a stance change or unblockable, something that might normally

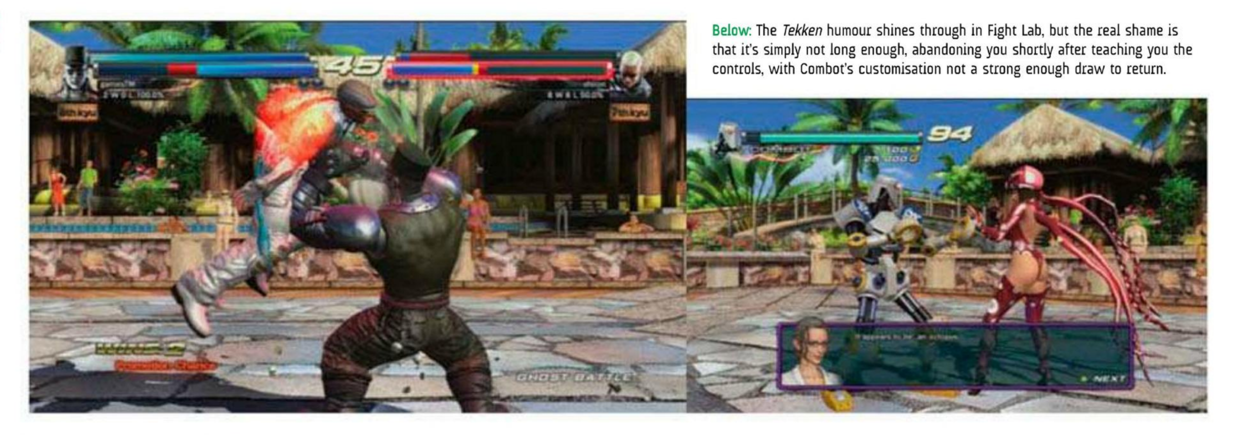
FURTHER READING: FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE | FEATURE | ISSUE 114 | PAGE 64

FAQs

Q. HOW MANY CHARACTERS IN TOTAL?
There are 50 characters and they're all unlocked, so you can use them from the start.

Q. WHAT ABOUT THE PRE-ORDER CHARACTERS?
Angel, Kunimitsu, Ancient Ogre and Michelle Chang are pre-order characters, to be made available later on to all players at no extra charge.

Q. DO I HAVE TO TAG UP?
Nope. There are one-on-one and two-on-one options. Characters fighting alone recover their own health and do more damage than they would as part of a tag team.



Below: The *Tekken* humour shines through in Fight Lab, but the real shame is that it's simply not long enough, abandoning you shortly after teaching you the controls, with Combot's customisation not a strong enough draw to return.

Below: Some matches reward you with extra items or money. It's random, and thus designed to keep you playing.

be impractical in close-quarters combat due to the long startup.

The downside is that calling your partner in for a quick combo extension means they lose all their red life, so you're forced into deciding whether losing that is worth the extra damage. There are further nuances at play, too. Various combinations of characters have different attributes, depending on whether they 'get along' or not. For example, a sidelined Heihachi will enter the damage bonus mode of Rage much faster when Kuma takes damage than he would if, say, it was his hated son Kazuya being beaten up. There are also team-specific animations for tag throws and win poses, encouraging and rewarding further experimentation with new characters.

Katsuhiro Harada has given up on forcing *Tekken* into a 3D *Streets Of Rage* template, leaving the single-player appeal in the hands of Arcade, Team Battle, Survival, Ghost Battle and Fight Lab. Arcade is the usual line of opponents standing between you and a ridiculously hard final boss, although Unknown isn't nearly as infuriating as Jinpachi was in *Tekken 5*. Team Battle and Survival are nice extras, while Ghost Battle pits you against different ranks of opponents for a chance to win money and items, and to level up your own rank. In *Tekken 6*, your offline rank was capped at 1st Dan, a bizarre limitation that's thankfully been removed, meaning there's no reason to stop playing through Ghost Battles this time around. The main motivations are still to earn money and see what ridiculous customised characters you'll be fighting against.

Fight Lab could have been the cornerstone of single-player. Rather than force you through a training mode, this mode teaches you the mechanics of the game via a storyline concerning Lee training up Combot. Well, it's more a scenario than a storyline. Although it teaches you the core mechanics of *Tekken* – combos, punishing, throw techs, and so on – it ends just after the training wheels come off, taking little more than an hour to get through. Good idea, but one that feels slightly undercooked.

That leaves the customisation and online as the main time sinks, particularly as the two overlap given that you'll create a character with the former to show off in the latter. It helps that Namco Bandai isn't taking itself the least bit seriously – T-rex heads, police sirens, cake hats and bear shields are some of the ridiculous items available. It's also pleasing to see that training mode itself is exhaustive. It's corrected one of the main problems of *Tekken 6*'s equivalent, where you couldn't have a command list running alongside your training, and it also has extensive options to record various inputs to practise against. It's missing the frame data of *Virtua Fighter 5: Final Showdown*'s training, which might rankle with the most technical of fighting fans, but otherwise it's perfect.

Tekken Tag Tournament 2 is the closest the fighting genre has come to recapturing the spirit of ye olde classic *Capcom vs SNK 2*, in that this feels aimed directly at the hearts of fans rather than at their wallets. It's the closest any series has come to a 'best of' album, and is a fitting tribute to the legacy of the series thus far.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

ANGER MANAGEMENT: Rage is tied in to your partner, who is waiting on the sidelines to run in and receives a damage boost if you take too many knocks. It adds a nice extra to the tag dynamic.

KEEP YOUR DISTANCE

For those new to the *Tekken* series, the style of fighting is different from other 3D games. While *Virtua Fighter* is about up-close guessing games and *SoulCalibur* is about parrying, *Tekken* is a series where range is key. Knowing the right distance from your opponents is important as movement is flexible, which allows you to walk back and forth in a style similar to 2D fighters as you try to bait out attacks. You ideally want to be at a distance where they miss, and therefore you can hit back or launch a combo without waiting for blockstun to wear off first.



VERDICT 8/10
EXCELLENT TRIBUTE TO THE SERIES, EVEN BETTER GAME

BATTLE ROYALE WITH CHEESE

Anarchy Reigns



Your first online experience with *Anarchy Reigns* won't be pleasant. It won't even feel fair. Head into one of its chaotic battle royales and you'll find yourself immediately pummelled into a fine dust by an aggressive throng of elite level 50 warriors, your vain attempts to fight back disregarded in a seemingly inescapable flurry of limbs and explosions. It's disheartening, to say the least.

However, like many of Platinum's games – and several of Clover's before it – *Anarchy Reigns* is a beat-'em-up that requires time and patience; one whose rewards scale with the time you put into it. A few hours in and those punishing introductory battles start to open up, your mind settling into the raucous rhythm. It may not be as intricate or complex a game as we've come to expect from this developer, but it's no merciless button-basher. There's a subtle strain of strategy hidden beneath those muscled pimps and over-sexed vixens duking it out on screen.

You start with all the tools you're ever going to get: there are no combos to unlock or extra moves to be added to your repertoire. There's a medium and heavy attack, a modifier that allows you to use a limited 'Killer Weapon' such as Jack Cayman's chainsaw, and a grab button that activates cinematic throw moves. Combos are activated by timed presses of the attack buttons, with a slight delay modifying the actions performed, perhaps launching a foe into the air or leaping behind them for a surprise attack. You've also got a block, a dodge, and a lock-on that's of some use when fighting one-on-one, but is best used selectively when battling up to 16 other players.

In terms of depth, the system can barely hold a candle to genre masterpieces like *God Hand* or *Bayonetta*. *Anarchy Reigns*' multiplayer focus restricts the combat, keeping it from flourishing into something anywhere near as intricate or technical as in the offline world. The move set is fixed, combos are short and explosive rather than comprised of long strings, and there are no moves like a dodge cancel thrown in. It's all about maintaining balance when sparring online, something that hogties Platinum, preventing it from showing off its usual brazen 70-hit combos.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Platinum Games
PRICE: ¥7,980
RELEASE: Out now (Japan), 31 March 2013 (UK)
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Nevertheless, there is something to be said for the gradual learning process that sees you slowly eke out the game's subtler nuances. Let those cruel opening hours pass, find a character you like, and learn how they move. You'll gradually develop the required timing, and work out how to take advantage of minuscule openings in your enemies' defence, identifying those sweet spots and unleashing the heaviest attacks in your arsenal. *Anarchy Reigns* doesn't spell any of this out; it leaves it up to the player to teach themselves the intricacies tucked away. You'll eventually reach a state where you can react to your foes' attacks almost without needing to think about it. It's a satisfying moment, the game shifting from gruelling to exhilarating as everything snaps into place.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

PUNCH UP: The multiplayer brawler has been done before, but never on this scale. From punchy one-on-one brawls to the 16-player battle royales, Platinum has crafted a highly energetic take on the concept.

This doesn't completely vindicate *Anarchy Reigns*' flaws, though, of which there are several. Throws, for instance, are a problem, overused and inescapable once you find yourself caught in the opening animation.

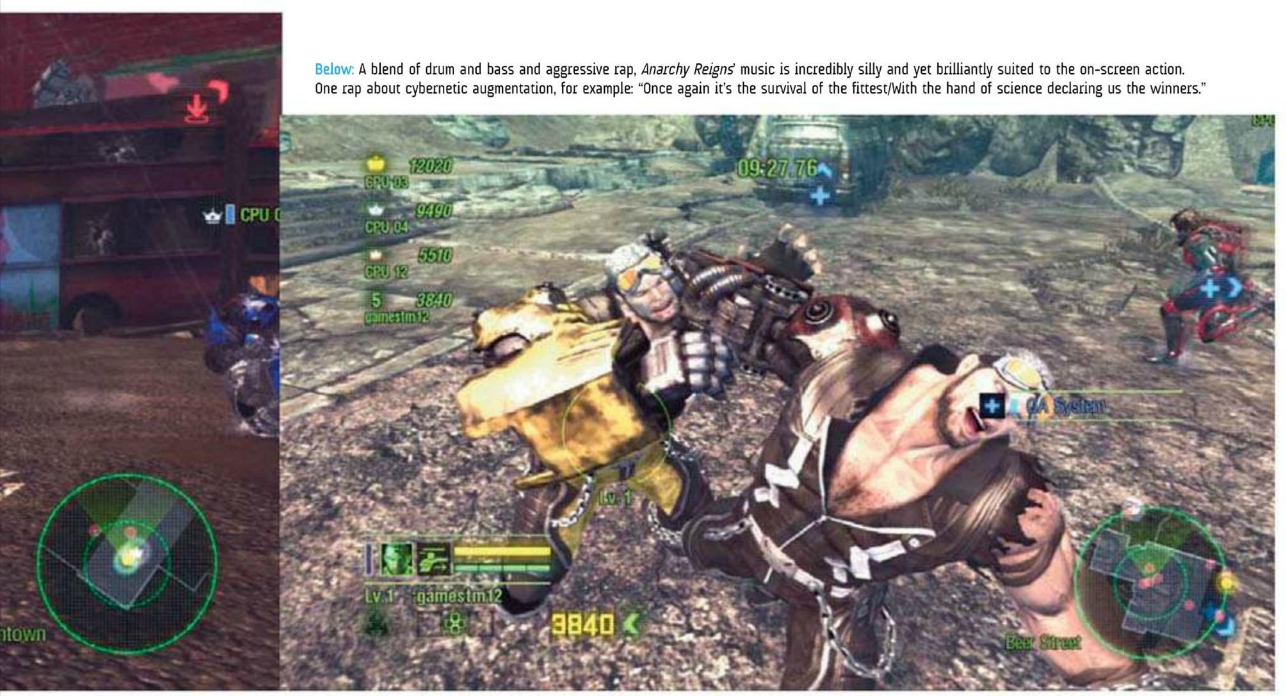
The combat also too often descends into chaos. With 16 players fighting in the same





Right: It's difficult to ignore the fact that *Anarchy Reigns* isn't the most impressive-looking game out there, sporting visuals that are about on par with what we expect from the more ambitious XBLA releases. It's definitely the least stylish of Platinum's games.

THERE'S REAL CHARACTER HERE, AND AT THE BACK END OF THIS GENERATION, THERE ARE TOO FEW GAMES THAT CAN TRULY LAY CLAIM TO SUCH PRAISE



Below: A blend of drum and bass and aggressive rap, *Anarchy Reigns'* music is incredibly silly and yet brilliantly suited to the on-screen action. One rap about cybernetic augmentation, for example: "Once again it's the survival of the fittest/With the hand of science declaring us the winners."

BETTER THAN — DEVIL MAY CRY 2



WORSE THAN — GOD HAND

FAQs

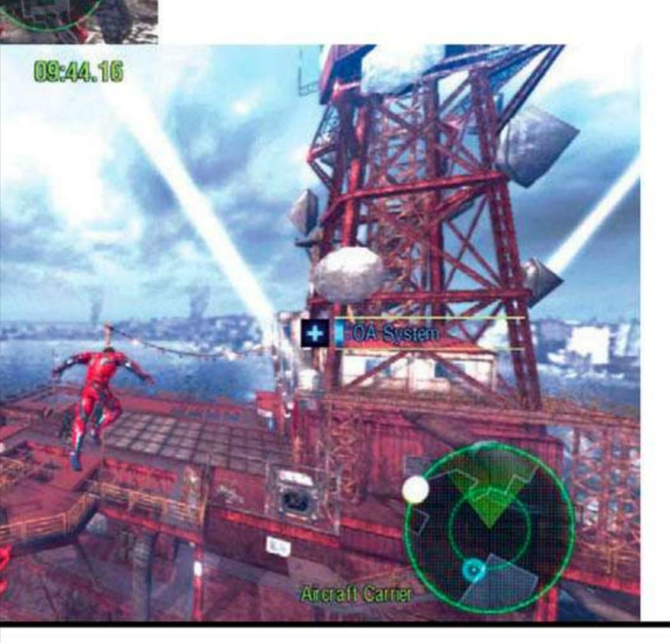
Q. DID YOU SAY DEATHBALL?
Yep. It's a *Blood Bowl*-esque deathmatch that takes place in large stadiums, in which you try to score goals while killing enemies.

Q. HOW MANY CHARACTERS ARE THERE?
18, if you count DLC. They offer more than an aesthetic choice, each varying in speed and size.

Q. IS THERE ANY CO-OP?
Oddly there's no co-op in the single-player, but players can team up in multiplayer.

IT'S A MAD WORLD

Anarchy Reigns' single-player component isn't too far removed from Platinum's 2009 beat-'em-up, *MadWorld*. It's split into two campaigns starring two Japanese character clichés: the butch, heavyweight Jack Cayman, and the handsome, lean Leo. Each campaign takes place across four sizeable open-world areas – shared with the multiplayer – in which there are three story missions and three free missions, ranging from hovercraft races to boss battles against giant leviathans. The common Platinum trait of awarding medals for performance returns, but the developer's knack for intense but fair difficulty is absent – on normal we found little challenge in achieving platinum for most missions. Each campaign offers around four hours of game time, but it definitely feels like a sideshow to the main event of multiplayer.



spot, whatever encroaching intricacy you might have felt in the combat system is eroded in an explosion of limbs and sparks, the carnage on screen making it very difficult indeed to make out exactly what your character – or anyone else's, for that matter – is doing. During these moments of confusion, you'll often find yourself interrupted by unseen attackers, your miniature combo chains put to an end by other players that wade into the fray unannounced.

Sometimes this works, sometimes it doesn't. The modes that *Anarchy Reigns* has borrowed from the FPS such as capture the flag – and those it hasn't, like DeathBall – become more fun as the chaos ramps up. That said, the game's greatest successes are found when the game reins it in, such as in the two-on-two tag deathmatches or one-on-one cage match bouts. Taking place in smaller arenas, and without constant surprise attacks breaking your combo chain, you're freer to focus on single enemies, making for battles rooted in expertise rather than button-bashing.

The levelling system underneath all of this feels like an afterthought. Early levelling is incredibly slow, with your initial scores doing little to add to your total required to rank up. You don't get a great deal when you do, either. If you haven't already unlocked them in the single-player campaign, you'll get access to new characters and perk-like abilities, but for the most part there's little real reward for your sluggish progression through the ranks.

It all keeps *Anarchy Reigns* from attaining the heights of the genre that Platinum had so tantalisingly touched upon with *Bayonetta*. There is a lot to be impressed with – *Anarchy Reigns* capably reinvents the multiplayer brawler, mixing in elements of online shooters and presenting it in a framework that is undeniably entertaining – but the underwhelming single-player, the limitations of the fixed move set, and the repetitious brawling mean the magic that Platinum weaves only holds for so long. The more you played *Bayonetta* and *God Hand*, the more you felt you were getting out of it – always learning, always finding new ways to overcome your enemies – but here the adrenaline eventually dissipates. You realise that once you've got to grips with the combat system, there's nowhere to take it. In this respect, *Anarchy Reigns* feels closer to *MadWorld* than Platinum's other beat-'em-ups.

But flaws aside, *Anarchy Reigns* still stands as proof that there's life in the online brawler, and it could go to interesting places – if the 2013 Western release isn't greeted with the same apathy as it has in Japan, that is. And what a shame that would be. *Anarchy Reigns* is far from perfect, but despite being less striking than the developer's past titles, it nevertheless embodies much of that Platinum Games spirit, blending energy, humour, transforming robots and hammer-wielding cyborg bulls. There's real character here, and at the back end of this generation, there are too few games that can truly lay claim to such praise.



A SILVER MEDAL PERFORMANCE

SOCIAL DISTORTION

Rock Band Blitz*

Back when Harmonix first came up with the idea for *Guitar Hero*, its plastic guitars felt like the rhythm-action genre had finally found its logical conclusion, while the evolution to *Rock Band* only cemented the idea by putting every conceivable rock instrument in the hands of the player. *Amplitude* and *Frequency*, as much as we loved them, were a thing of the past. Or so it seemed. With *Rock Band Blitz*, Harmonix has thrown away the plastic instruments, returning to an *Amplitude* style of gameplay that, crucially, draws upon your existing *Rock Band* song catalogue for a gargantuan pool of music from the moment you start the game.

For *Rock Band* purists, the removal of instruments might seem like a step backwards at first and, in fact, the game is certainly much easier to play than its bigger brother. But there is something undeniably satisfying about the joypad-only control scheme. Note charts use only two buttons, one on the left of the controller and another on the right, so tapping out a rhythm with two thumbs feels as natural as table-drumming to a favourite tune. Tone-deaf tune-murderers who traditionally shy away from the mic will also be relieved that vocals now play out through button presses, so you can play to the singer's rhythm rather than trying to hit the notes. Perfect for those of us who can't help dancing to the lyrics.

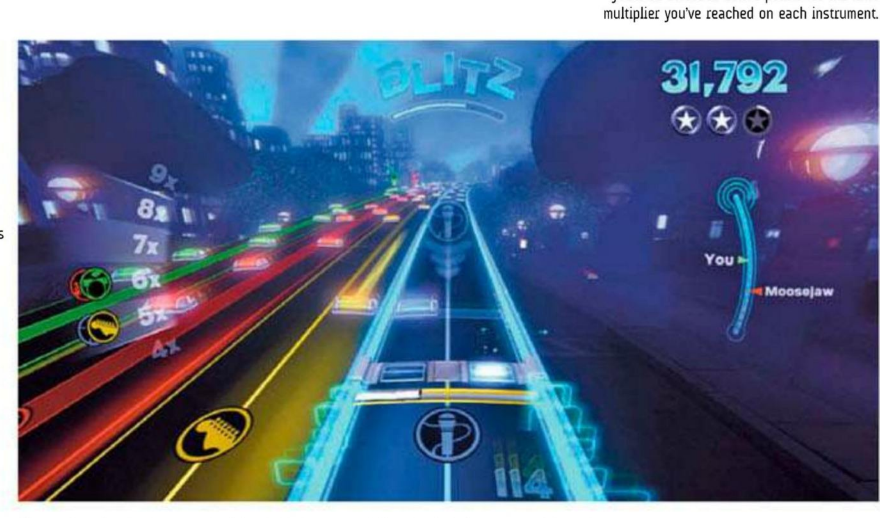
Once you're in the swing of things, you'll be zipping flawlessly along the note tracks in no time, though it does take a while to get out of the typical *Rock Band* mindset of 'perfecting' a track. Yet neither does it really play like *Amplitude* either. While the latter game was about constructing a song by effectively plate-spinning track sections, *Blitz* plays the entire song no matter what, and it's your job to play along, with successful notes boosting the volume of the track, and there's no fail state. The real game, then, isn't about completing a song but rather scoring as many points as possible.

Each note track has its own score multiplier that is levelled up by hitting a certain number of notes in a section, but there's also an overall level cap on the multipliers. So if you get to a checkpoint in the song and one of your tracks is on a low multiplier, the overall level cap will only increase by a minimal amount.

DETAILS

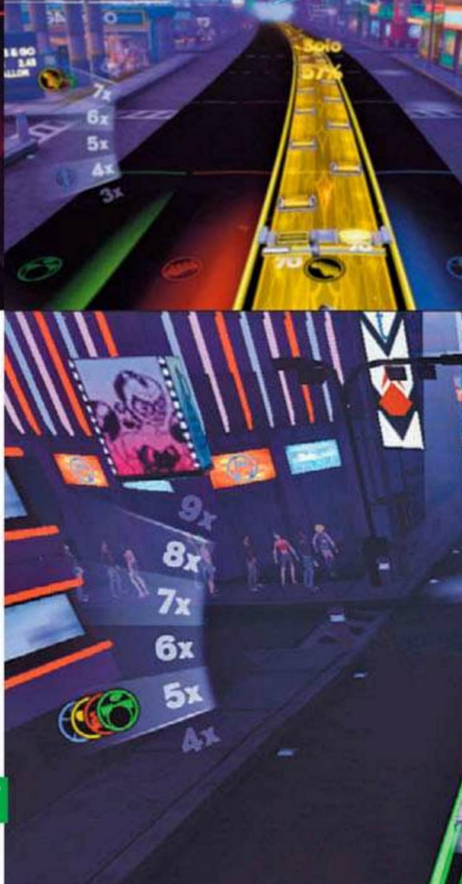
FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Harmonix
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 1,200 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Right: Upon reaching the end of a stage, you'll be awarded bonus points for the final multiplier you've reached on each instrument.



Above: Like other XBLA games, *Rock Band Blitz* keeps you informed of 'rival' scores, and how close you are to overtaking them, during each song.





Successful *Blitz* players therefore have to jump between tracks frequently to keep all of the multipliers topped up, which certainly goes against natural *Rock Band* instincts but does make sense after a while.

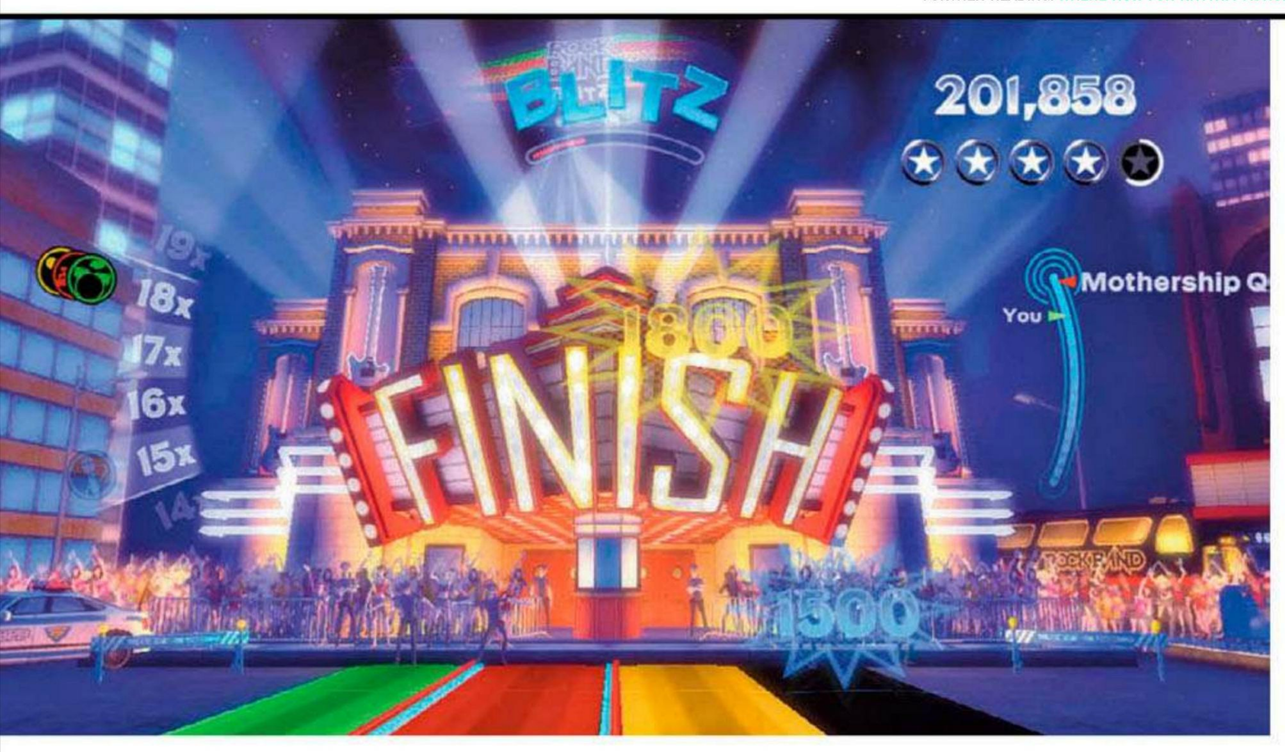
This being a leaderboard game, *Rock Band Blitz* is all about the pursuit of the high score, and there are a number of strategies for how to crack that on the basic level of simply learning a song's nuances and knowing exactly when to concentrate on one note track over another, but then there are also power-ups to contend with. For each tune, players are able

Above: The power-up selection screen lets you know vital track data so you can make an informed decision. A vocal multiplier power-up would be a good idea here.

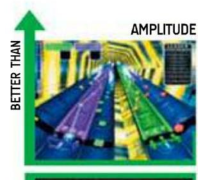
Right: This power-up asks you to follow the purple notes across tracks, which has its own pros and cons.

IF PROOF WERE NEEDED THAT SOCIAL GAMING FEATURES CAN EXIST WITHOUT RIPPING OFF GAMERS, THIS IS IT

FURTHER READING: WHERE NOW FOR RHYTHM-ACTION? | FEATURE | ISSUE 124 | PAGE 82



BETTER THAN



AMPLITUDE

WORSE THAN



ROCK BAND 3

FAQs

Q. NO INSTRUMENTS?
Nope. All you need is a single Xbox controller. And even then you'll only use four buttons.

Q. HOW?
Note charts use only two buttons, which is a step down from the three of *Amplitude*, while two shoulder buttons are used to change tracks.

Q. ARE YOU SURE IT'S JUST FOUR?
Actually, we forgot the power-up button. It's X. But that's really it. Well, Start pauses, of course.

TRACK BLITZING

Included in the *Rock Band Blitz* download are 25 all-new tracks that are also instantly playable in *Rock Band 3*, which pretty much justifies the price of the game alone. There are some absolute corkers in there, including Iron Maiden's *The Wicker Man*, *One Week* by Barenaked Ladies, and the incredible *Death On Two Legs* by Queen. A few tracks are tailored to the way *Rock Band Blitz* plays, of course, so something like Pink's *Raise Your Glass* might not be so appealing when played with instruments – though *Rock Band* karaoke players will naturally love it – but there are still plenty of decent tracks here to sink your teeth into.



to equip up to three power-ups that introduce new subsets of rules to the game. Some are simple score multipliers while others are a little more extravagant, such as a pinball that wipes out any note it hits and can be kept in play by catching it at the bottom of the screen.

There's no right or wrong way to choose a set of power-ups, though it largely comes down to your own playstyle as well as which combination seems best suited to each song, so there are tons of tactical approaches to every single tune, adding an almost endless replay factor, which Harmonix capitalises on exceptionally.

Using more than just the Xbox Live friends list and leaderboards, Harmonix has linked *Rock Band Blitz* with its *Rock Band* World Facebook app so that friends can easily send each other challenges or even engage in co-op missons set by Harmonix itself. Multiplayer is handled asynchronously, so score attack challenges can be tackled at your leisure and repeatedly within the given time limit.

The way Harmonix encourages community play – by placing an in-game currency charge on the use of power-ups and offering the biggest coin payouts to those who engage with other players – is sure to rile a few traditionalists, but there's no denying that it does motivate players to connect with others more than they normally would, and this, in turn, increases the enjoyment. If proof were ever needed that social gaming features can both exist without ripping off gamers and be used to enrich an experience, *Rock Band Blitz* is it.

When the motivating factor of the social functions collide with obsessive high-score chasing and the tactical possibilities of Harmonix's game design, *Rock Band Blitz* really becomes something special: compulsive, rewarding and utterly enthralling. Just as the original *Rock Band* sapped hours of time away as players became lost in music, so too does *Blitz*, tapping into several primal parts of the brain at once. The combined result is dangerously addictive, and is more potent the more *Rock Band* songs you already have sitting on your hard drive. Such is the extent to which it breathes new life into your oldest tracks.

After a rocky couple of years for rhythm-action, in which *Guitar Hero* came to an end and *Rock Band 3* failed to repeat the retail success of its predecessors, it's fantastic to see Harmonix back on top with a game that reinvigorates the genre in new and interesting ways. But, more than that, it's just great to have an extremely playable reason to return to some old favourite songs.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

ROCK WITH FRIENDS: Though *Rock Band Blitz* doesn't have a traditional multiplayer mode, its asynchronous play, enhanced by the official Facebook app, complements *Rock Band 3*'s party play very well.

VERDICT 9/10
MORE THAN JUST A SPIN-OFF. ESSENTIAL

ANOTHER IMPRESSIVE EVOLUTION

Pokémon Black/White Version 2

Critics are quick to slam Nintendo's formula-centric approach to game development, and however much you love the company, it's not hard to see why. At a glance, all of the firm's major franchises rarely deviate from the tried and tested: Link will always have to go grab a bunch of triangles from dungeons, *Metroid* fans are all too used to having their powers arbitrarily taken away within the first few minutes, and poor Mario must be sick of hearing that the princess is in another castle. And even more so than the rest, *Pokémon* is a series that seems to have changed little in over 15 years – grab one of three cute things, make it hit loads of other cute things, then put these new recruits in balls and do the same with them. But under the bonnet, *Pokémon* has evolved more than pretty much any other franchise its age, and where once was a simple kids' game now lives a devilishly complex yet supremely accessible pinnacle of JRPG goodness.

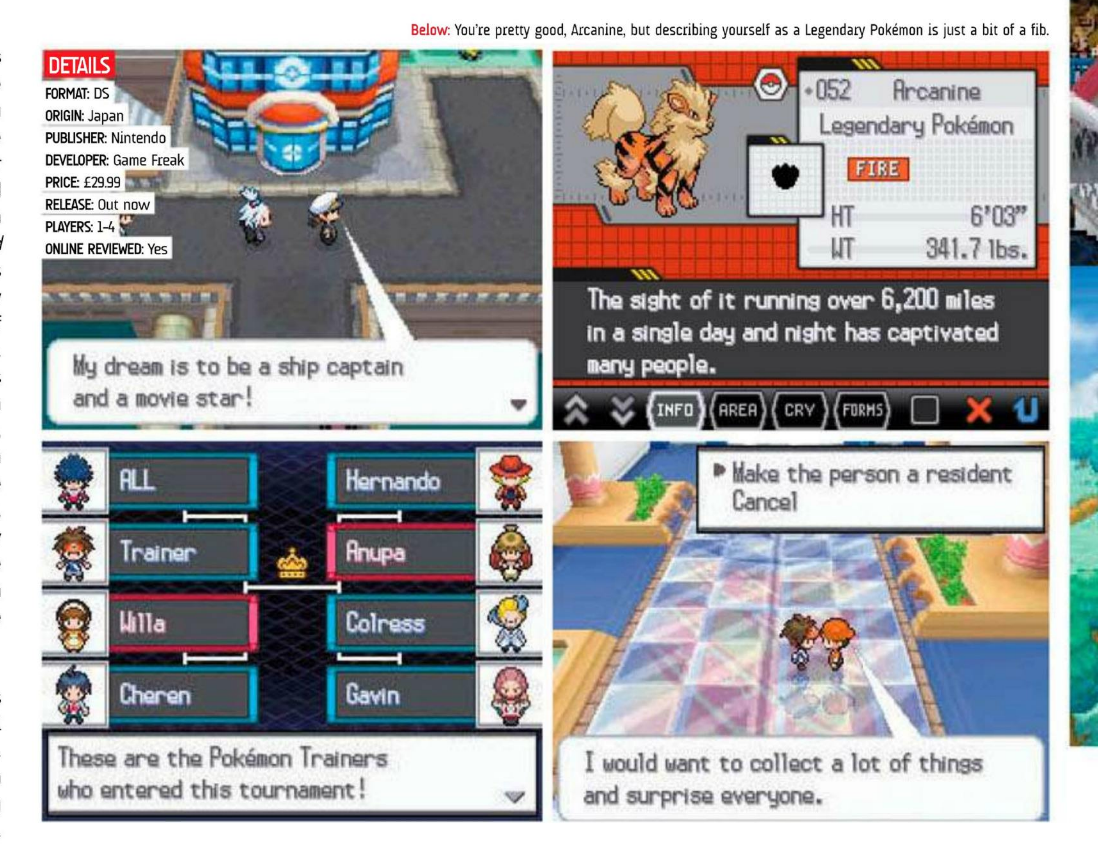
So while it might seem like not much has changed to the untrained eye, veterans will be quick to spot some fairly major changes. For one, Game Freak has done away with *Black* and *White*'s core hook of having just new monsters until after the credits. While it certainly helped mix things up and make the adventure a little more exciting, these sequels offer far more variety by having monsters from all five generations live wild as one. There's a welcome shift towards letting trainers get their hands on genuinely useful Pokémon fairly early too, especially if you're willing to go exploring. Each area now plays host to a wider variety of monsters, so if you're keen enough to weather painfully low encounter rates on the rarest critters, you can have the makings of a dream team before the story has even started to hit its stride.

It's not the only move to pull some of the better content out of the endgame and put it in front of more players earlier on, either. All manner of extracurricular opportunities pop up as the story unfolds rather than after, as is so often the case in the series. PokéStar movie creation, which is effectively a cunningly disguised set of battle puzzles, along with an achievement system of sorts with the Medal Box and even a host of new Extralink multiplayer challenges all come into play within the first few hours, to varying effect. PokéStar, for one, could be a lot better, and while the puzzle aspect of movie-making is awesome, the statistical nature of *Pokémon*'s battle system means that it's not exactly the best fit. All your hard work can be undone by an unlikely miss or a jammy critical, after all.

But in its core mechanics, *Pokémon* has never been stronger. Battling, for many the heart and soul of the experience, comes in all flavours imaginable, and the huge variety of Pokémon available makes it impossibly unlikely that you'll ever have the same duel twice. Single, double, triple and rotation battles all require different teams and strategies to get the most out of them – a hell of a lot of work for even the most devoted trainer. Monster availability and growth has been tweaked as well, making connectivity more of a necessity, just as it was in the pre-Wi-Fi link cable days, though this is both a good and a bad thing.

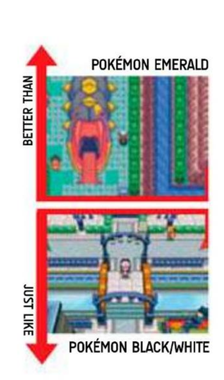
You see, as much as we loved the concept of the Dream World – the new browser-based method of catching and training Pokémon introduced in *Black* and *White* – the execution was sloppy at best. Dodgy mini-games and laborious grinding were once the only way to find monsters with their hidden abilities, though these are now far more widely available in the regular game through both trades and the new Hidden Grottoes – secret areas that house special creatures only a true explorer will ever find or catch. While this mitigates the rigmarole of jumping between DS and PC, with lengthy save and transfer times

Below: You're pretty good, Arcanine, but describing yourself as a Legendary Pokémon is just a bit of a fib.



DETAILS
- **FORMAT:** DS
- **ORIGIN:** Japan
- **PUBLISHER:** Nintendo
- **DEVELOPER:** Game Freak
- **PRICE:** £29.99
- **RELEASE:** Out now
- **PLAYERS:** 1-4
- **ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes

YOU CAN HAVE THE MAKINGS OF A DREAM TEAM BEFORE THE STORY HAS EVEN STARTED TO HIT ITS STRIDE



TOMORROW, THE WORLD

In-game tournaments are nothing new to the *Pokémon* franchise. From *Emerald*'s Battle Frontier to *Black/White*'s engaging Battle Subway, we've seen countless ways to put our teams through their paces without having to bother anyone else. Subway returns, as do the rich rewards that await competent trainers, but it's also joined by the World Championship, a place where the best of the best come to show off their perfect Pokémon. Familiar faces abound here, and from all over the *Pokémon* world – pretty much every generation seems to be represented too, with everyone from Misty to Steven putting in an appearance on the grandest stage of all. No sign of Ash, though. Well, not yet, at least…

FAQs

Q. NEW MONSTERS?
Strictly speaking no, though there are new variants of older ones plus access to some of the secret Legendaries at last.

Q. LOTS TO DO?
You bet, and for once, not all of the best stuff is reserved for those who have beaten the Elite Four.

Q. MAJOR CHANGES?
A few, but it's not like there was much to fix. Most of the new stuff goes on behind the scenes. Only the hardcore will notice how it's better, rather than just that it is.



Below: N actually seemed like quite a decent chap, as we recall. Now, most of his Pokémon are in the wild and he's a bad guy. What a difference a few years makes…

Left: Join Avenue lets you recruit real-world players you pass with your C-Gear to open shops that sell rare gear. It's like StreetPass, but not quite.

Above: The new Kyurem forms are made by fusing the dragon with one of the two *Black/White* cover stars. Good science at work.



not making matters any easier, it also renders the system almost worthless. We'd far rather have seen improvements to the forward-thinking Dream World than just having it swept under the rug.

It's a good-looking DS game as well, slick new presentation and more emphasis on cut-scenes and 3D visuals making this an obvious transitional title on the series' inevitable march towards the 3DS. It's plain to see why Game Freak hasn't arrived on the 3D handheld just yet, though – *Black* and *White 2* are designed to be as cross-compatible with the original games as possible, and a change of platform would either mean significant alterations to the formula, likely at the expense of compatibility, or lashings of abuse for releasing the same game again.

And there's the thing. If Nintendo was the kind of lazy, formulaic developer it gets so much stick for being, a quick 3DS port of the DS games with a couple of extra areas is exactly what this would be. Instead, we get a true sequel – a game that cleverly and tactfully revisits the old while skilfully introducing the new, and the highest point in a franchise that already has many neck-craning peaks. As with so many modern follow-ups, having experience of the original games is a benefit rather than a necessity here. But whether you've somehow never played a *Pokémon* game, you've only recently dived in or you've been around since the start, the vast world of Unova welcomes you equally.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MONSTER MASH: While *Black* and *White*'s USP was that it exclusively featured new Pokémon until the post-game, the sequel does away with this and is all the better balanced for it.

VERDICT 8/10
YEP, IT'S STILL SUPER EFFECTIVE

IT DOES HAVE BOTH THOSE THINGS IN IT, YES

Sound Shapes

It's sad to think that, for many people, the thrill of creating music is something they may never truly enjoy. A beginning guitarist may string together a sequence of simple chords; a novice pianist might stumble upon a particularly pretty grouping of notes; even wannabe drummers could accidentally hit upon a crazy rhythm that sounds like nothing else. But to create a full piece, something that is expressive or takes the listener on a journey... That's a whole different level. In this digital age, though, we're surrounded by tools that let anyone play at being a composer.

GarageBand's Smart Instruments allow complex patterns and lines to be woven together with a few clicks or taps, while incredibly basic sequencers can create killer loops in moments. And in *Sound Shapes*, we have a game that taps into this very notion, allowing players to dabble at composition while at the same time trying their hands at level design – platform gaming that creates music and quite literally takes players on a journey. And you know what? It's wonderful.

But before you dive into the user-friendly editing tools and start trying to re-create *Sonic* with sonics, the campaign is the perfect showcase for what this impressive piece of software can really do. Each 'album' consists of several tracks from a duo of artists (one musical, one visual) and has its own theme, and from the tricky pixel art electro assaults of the Deadmau5 stages to Beck's chilled-out lessons in synaesthesia, they're generally superb. As in *LittleBigPlanet*, each stage is clearly made with the packaged editor – there are no tricks or gimmicks beyond those you yourself could employ with a little inventive thinking, and again like Media Molecule's games, elements of these might even inspire you with how some of the tools can be used. Which is handy, since clearing a stage gives you access to all of the elements that featured in it for use in your own creations.

The best part, though, is the way the music and the gameplay interact with one another. While at its most basic it's a case of collecting coins to trigger notes, beats, samples and phrases, every little element also has its own audio signature. Cogs clunk around with rhythmic industrial drones; hazards become active or safe not as the beat dictates but in unison with it, forcing players to do more than follow the track; even some types of platform have their own musical layers, which is often altered when the player interacts with it. As such, it's a tricky balancing act at first – focus too heavily on making the perfect tune and your level will suffer, but think platforming first and it's unlikely you'll have much of a soundtrack beyond a wall of noise.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Queasy Games
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: The cloud form is used sparingly in the main game, largely because it removes pretty much all challenge.



Right: Ah, the singing flower sun cloud things. These made us incredibly happy. They still do, actually.

MISSING LINK

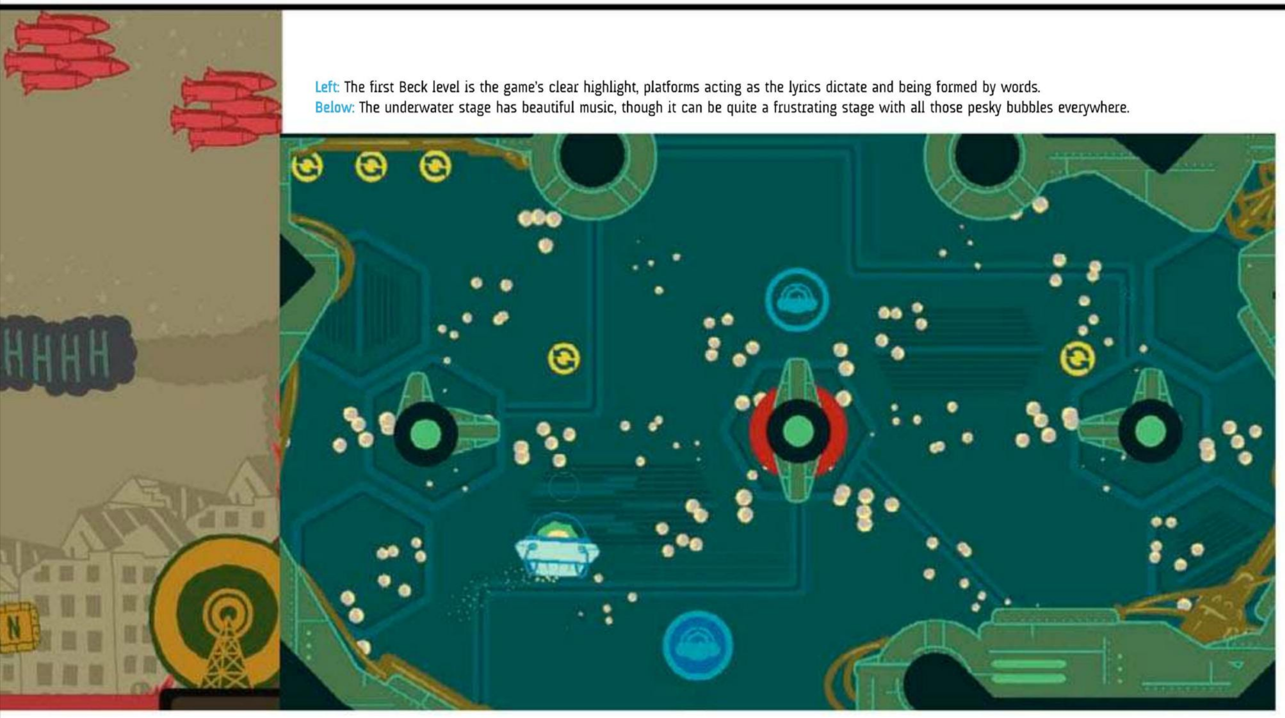
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MODERATE SUCCESS: *Sound Shapes*' UGC needs a tag system. It's unclear which levels are awful, which are made just for the music, which are good platform levels and which are a combination of both.

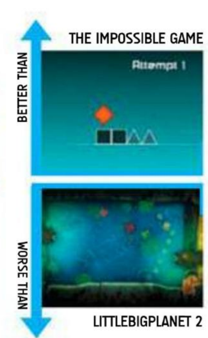
FOCUS TOO HEAVILY ON MAKING THE PERFECT TUNE AND YOUR LEVEL WILL SUFFER

FURTHER READING: WHERE NOW FOR RHYTHM-ACTION? | FEATURE | ISSUE 124 | PAGE 82

Left: The first Beck level is the game's clear highlight, platforms acting as the lyrics dictate and being formed by words.
Below: The underwater stage has beautiful music, though it can be quite a frustrating stage with all those pesky bubbles everywhere.



BETTER THAN
THE IMPOSSIBLE GAME



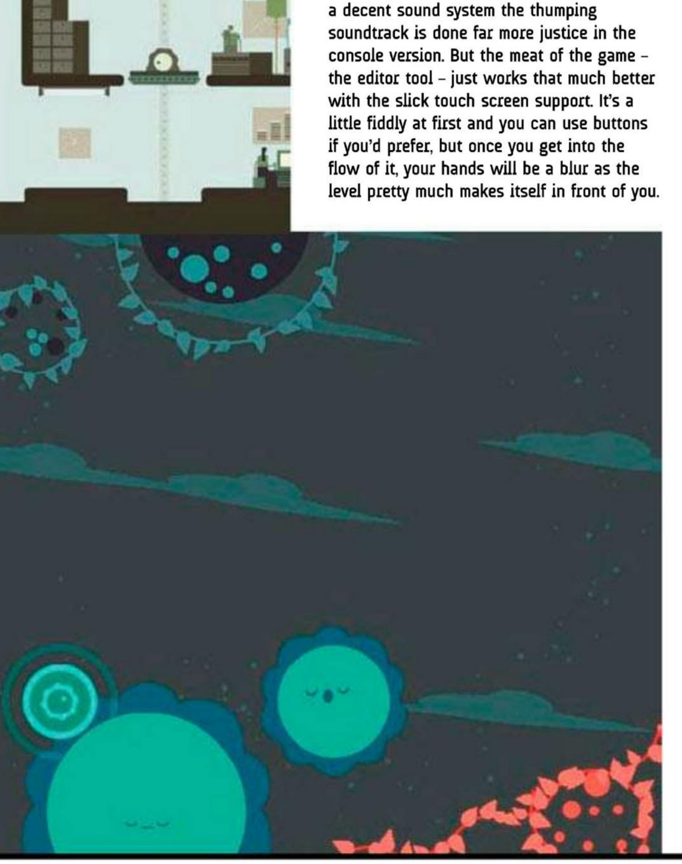
WORSE THAN
LITTLEBIGPLANET 2

FAQs

Q. HOW'S THE MUSIC?
Generally speaking, it's really good, especially when it all comes together at the end of a particularly awesome level.

Q. BEST STAGES?
There are several incredible ones, the first of the Beck tracks being a clear winner in terms of the way the music and visuals work in tandem.

Q. AND THE EDITOR?
It's solid enough, though making a decent level is far harder than it may first seem...

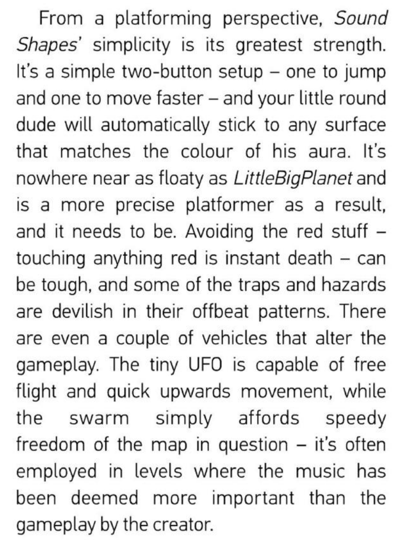


CROSS PLATFORM

We've had a bit of a fiddle with the PlayStation 3 version of *Sound Shapes* as well as the Vita one, and while they're basically the same game, it does feel like something better suited to the handheld. It looks lush on the big screen, and with a decent sound system the thumping soundtrack is done far more justice in the console version. But the meat of the game – the editor tool – just works that much better with the slick touch screen support. It's a little fiddly at first and you can use buttons if you'd prefer, but once you get into the flow of it, your hands will be a blur as the level pretty much makes itself in front of you.

From a platforming perspective, *Sound Shapes*' simplicity is its greatest strength. It's a simple two-button setup – one to jump and one to move faster – and your little round dude will automatically stick to any surface that matches the colour of his aura. It's nowhere near as floaty as *LittleBigPlanet* and is a more precise platformer as a result, and it needs to be. Avoiding the red stuff – touching anything red is instant death – can be tough, and some of the traps and hazards are devilish in their offbeat patterns. There are even a couple of vehicles that alter the gameplay. The tiny UFO is capable of free flight and quick upwards movement, while the swarm simply affords speedy freedom of the map in question – it's often employed in levels where the music has been deemed more important than the gameplay by the creator.

But frustratingly, that's not where *Sound Shapes* is at its best. It really shines when each of the single-screen challenges that makes up the whole level slowly builds the soundtrack, each phrase and individual note added slowly as you traverse the world, interact with objects and grab multiples of that gaming staple, the trusty coin. Even so, it's not a system without drawbacks – samples aren't exactly isolated brilliantly or cut particularly well, so collecting coins slowly or in the wrong order can result in an awkward, fractured soundtrack, which is also evident in the transition between different screens. And since rhythm, tempo or even the entire track can change from screen to screen, moving on can be quite a jarring experience.



The preloaded levels are over and done with in the space of an hour or two, though completionists might feel the need to return to a few to round up the missing collectables, after which a duo of new modes pop up to add some degree of longevity and also the bulk of the game's Trophies – Queasy Games rather sensibly elected to leave those out of the main campaign so as to preserve it as an experience and not push players towards playing in a certain way in search of those lovely, meaningless accolades. Death mode takes a single screen from each of the tracks and refits it with a particularly challenging task, often involving instant death, no restarts and a strict time limit. Random generation of collectables here does make it more luck than judgement at times, though it's a welcome addition all the same. Beat School is far more interesting, hiding away in the creation menu and tasking players with matching a particular beat by ear. It's effectively a mini sequencer, with correct and incorrect notes flagged up when you're ready so that you can tweak the pattern to get it just right.

Sound Shapes will ultimately live or die by its community, which at the time of writing is in dire need of a sonic boom in terms of both users and quality levels. With support, it'll grow into something glorious. But even without, it's yet another novel and wholly entertaining reason to get a Vita. But you probably still won't.



VERDICT 8/10
LITTLEBIGPLANET: THE MUSICAL



Shooting is slightly weightier than last year, which is a good thing following *FIFA 12*'s penchant for shots flying off players' boots like balloons. Heading, too, is easier than before, although still not quite intuitive enough.

BETTER THAN BEFORE. BUT IS THAT STILL ENOUGH?

FIFA 13



Probably the last high-profile *FIFA* game on this generation of consoles – before Xbox 720 and PS4 launch and terrify us with ultra-detailed renders of Rooney's screaming, nightmare-fuel game face – *FIFA 13* goes out on a high as the best instalment yet. That said, we'll be glad to see the next generation of *FIFA* make its debut. *13* is undoubtedly good, but with each passing year it becomes more obvious that diminishing returns are in effect. Just like Ryan Giggs.

Pre-release hype saw boasts of significant changes to the much-maligned (read: extremely buggy and unrealistic) career modes, and in fairness EA Canada has done a good job here. Transfers and league activity are much more realistic, if still not perfect, and the improved negotiation options add a dash of deadline day drama. The ability to move on and manage international teams is also nice, as is seeing your young virtual pro loaned out from the big boys to gain experience before moving back. After some dismal previous efforts – peculiar given EA's endorsement and licensing power – these changes finally bring the career modes up to the level they should have always been at.

On the pitch, this is the most enjoyable *FIFA* since *10*, thanks to a series of changes to both attacking AI and player control. Primary attacking targets are now aided in the final third by supporting runs from midfield, leading to some nice Barca-esque through ball opportunities. With more men committing forward there's greater scope for more authentic passing exchanges and expanded player choice when going for goal.

Complementing the AI improvement is a relaxation of *FIFA*'s draconian reliance on the right analogue stick when taking on players. It's far easier to beat your man now using just the momentum of the players and the ball, giving the game a sense of fluidity it previously lacked. It's still not on a par with the standard of *PES*, but it's a more than welcome change.

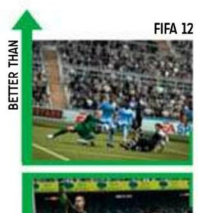
Sadly, old problems remain. It's still too difficult to shoot across the keeper, and there just isn't the variety of goals and goal-scoring situations enjoyed by *PES 2013*. After a few hours you'll start to see a familiar pattern to most of the goals scored, if not the build-up to them.

Still, EA should be proud of its achievements. *FIFA 13* is a fine football game, and comparing the series to where it started this generation shows how far the developer has come. With *PES* back on form, however, and that grand old series returning with a new engine next year, *FIFA* needs to step up its game.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS2, PS3, PSP, Vita, Wii
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: EA Canada
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 28 September
PLAYERS: 1-22
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: FIFA 12



WORSE THAN: PES 2013

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

GOAL MACHINE: After focusing on defensive mechanics last year, *FIFA 13* turns the spotlight onto the attacking controls, improving them greatly. Finally, we're free from using the right stick to find space.

VERDICT 8/10
PES IS BACK, BUT FIFA STILL HAS A LOT TO OFFER

CAVE NEW WORLD

La-Mulana

If you're the type of gamer who needs to keep up with everything, 2012 could be the year that ruins you. Until recently, it was just about feasible to get through every top-rated game in a year, even if you did end up with a small pile of shame collecting dust on the shelf by the end of it. Now, though, such an approach is completely impossible. The triple-A space is stronger than ever, and it's being joined by a burgeoning free-to-play market and a host of indie games that are, if anything, deeper and more engrossing than any retail release.

In other words, then, if you don't have the time or the commitment, you may well not notice that another retro-themed indie gem like *La-Mulana* even exists. This 2D platformer-cum-exploration game shares obvious DNA with the glorious *Spelunky*, but instead of that game's free-form, randomised journeys, this is a game of meticulous structure and an almost impenetrable level of difficulty. You play as Lemeza Kosugi, yet another fedora-sporting, whip-cracking adventurer, and it's your mission to negotiate the vast and extraordinarily complex ruins of La-Mulana, the apparent birthplace of civilisation.

Where *Spelunky* pits you against the traps and terrors of its manic mineshafts, *La-Mulana* offers a more cerebral approach. If anything, this game actually seems to have more in common with the latter stages of the ever-divisive *Fez*.

You see, there's no obvious path, and sections – or fields – are gradually opened up by solving puzzles. Unlike most games, though, the clues for deciphering these conundrums aren't generally found in the same place as the puzzles themselves. And to call them clues is a bit of a stretch – obtuse, confusing semi-hints might be better. You'll need a notepad and pen to keep track of everything, and even if you do manage to start breaking through *La-Mulana*'s esoteric logic, there are plenty of spikes, monsters and enormous Guardian bosses to eviscerate your body as you try to rest your mind.

It's an extraordinarily hard game, and the type of time sink that many won't be prepared for. While *La-Mulana* doesn't feel the need to kick you all the way back to the beginning every time you die, there's every chance you'll get so lost in its maze of pillars, vases and idols that you'll wish you had been. Like *Fez*, it'll probably take more than a few trips to the internet to get yourself through to the end, although there's nothing quite like that game's community-driven puzzle-solving to really lose yourself in.

There's a lot to admire in *La-Mulana*. After struggling to hit Western shores in its Japan-only WiiWare incarnation for years, it's a treat to finally be able to play it. Actually, it's not a treat. It's a nightmare. But if the success of *Dark Souls* has proven anything, it's that there's a world of people out there who just want to be punished.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Wii
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nigoro
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: $14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, Pentium 4 2.0GHz, 1GB RAM, DirectX 9.0c with 128MB VRAM, 500MB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





Right: Visually, the remake is very impressive. The 2D style is plucked from the 16-bit era rather than the pixel art of recent indie darlings, and there's an almost painted look to some of the backgrounds. It shows 2D can be just as striking as anything 'modern'.

FINGERPRINT

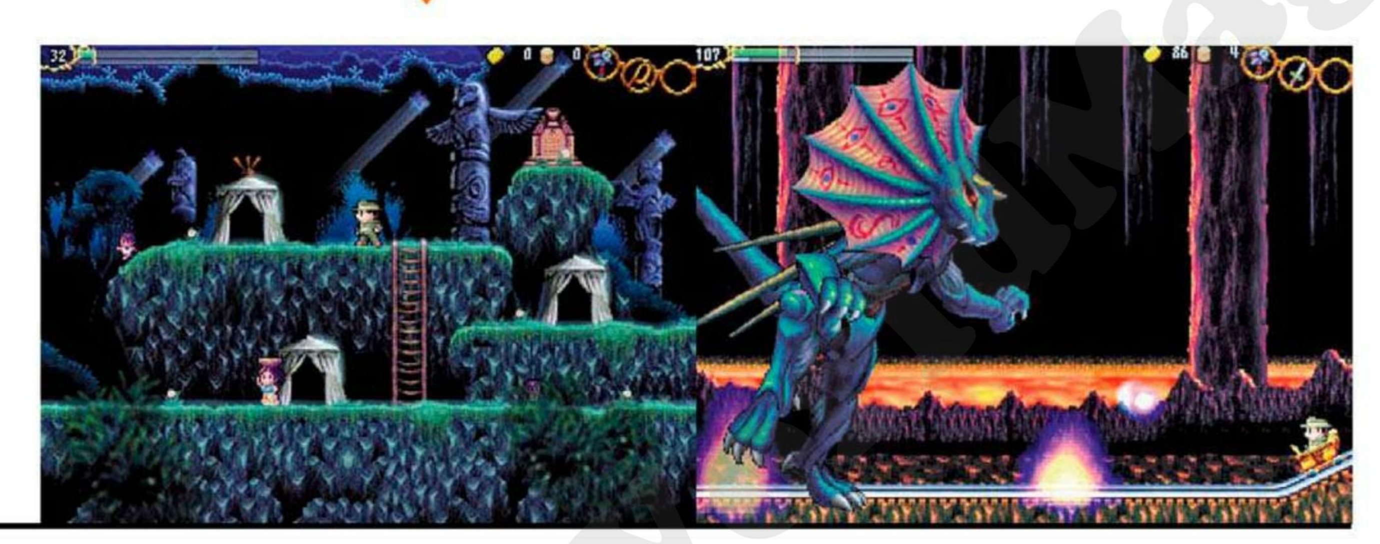
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SHAMELESS PADDING: *La-Mulana* is another 2012 indie effort that definitely requires players to have a pen and notepad at the ready. Hardcore gaming is most certainly back.




VERDICT 8/10

MASOCHISTIC, BUT HIGHLY ACCOMPLISHED



WAR VETERAN

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*

Back in 2003, Valve released a port of its phenomenally popular *Half-Life* mod, *Counter-Strike*, exclusively on the Xbox. It was, in many ways, the perfect replica of its PC counterpart, offering console gamers the first chance to immerse themselves in the strategic first-person shooter with minimal tweaks to the original design.

The most noticeable alteration was the inclusion of a weapon wheel that stripped the game of its many shop menus, reducing it into a simple radial to benefit the console control pad. This minute change was emblematic of the game's fundamental failing: *Counter-Strike* wasn't designed for consoles.

Nearly ten years later and Valve has returned with another *Counter-Strike* destined for a Microsoft console and, for better or worse, the weapon radial returns. Has Valve learnt nothing? Well, it turns out it's learnt quite a lot, actually. Designed from the ground up for PC, Mac and home consoles, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* isn't another attempt at simply porting the original to additional hardware, but rather the first legitimate evolution of the brand since *CS: Source* overhauled the physics and aesthetics way back in 2004.

With that in mind, it's interesting how much the FPS landscape has changed in the interim. While both *1.6* and *Source* have remained a mainstay of PC gamers' online routine, console shooters have been transformed into XP-driven experiences, fuelled by respawns, perks and those all-encompassing killstreaks.

To say that *CS: GO* feels stripped back by comparison will come as no surprise; but to say it's the most elegantly balanced, skill-oriented and thrilling shooter we've had the pleasure of playing for some time… Well, that's a pill some might find hard to swallow.

The setup is simple: two teams – one terrorist, the other counter-terrorist – start at opposite ends of the map, with the two main modes involving either the terrorists planting a bomb, or the counter-terrorists rescuing hostages. Kills and success reward players with cash to buy weapons at the beginning of each round, and with zero respawns, players are encouraged to be a little more cautious with their tactics.

This is where balance comes into play. Regardless of how many hours you have pumped into online servers, every player starts off on an even standing. That's not to say that newcomers won't feel the biting indignity of an early trouncing when they jump into the game for the first time – in fact, *Counter-Strike* players form one of the most hardened and elite communities in gaming. But *CS: GO* rewards time, patience and earned skill, which unfortunately has become something of a rarity in the genre.

New players can put off being chewed up online, Weapons Course acting as a serviceable introduction to the fundamentals and offering a fleeting appearance of Valve's trademark laconic wit. Elsewhere, two new modes – Arms Race and Demolition – feel a bit more relaxed than standard rounds. Both are derived from Gun Game, which has had something of a renaissance in recent years since *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* included it as a Wager Match, but it actually began life as a *Counter-Strike* mod years prior. Here, each kill rewards the player with a new gun, with the first to cycle through all the game's weapons declared the victor.

Meanwhile, Demolition is a welcome mix of bomb-defusal and a twist on the Gun Game rules, with players rewarded with a new weapon between rounds if they have registered a kill.

These two modes come paired with some new maps, designed around intense, small-scale skirmishes, which, in fairness, the original game lacked. However, outside these two new modes, Valve hasn't included any new battlegrounds, which is sorely disappointing.

So it's the game you fondly remember, having undergone a facelift and released with a few concessions for consoles. Matchmaking feels beneficial for PC players as well, but the radial shop menu is still a befuddling mess like it was nearly a decade ago.

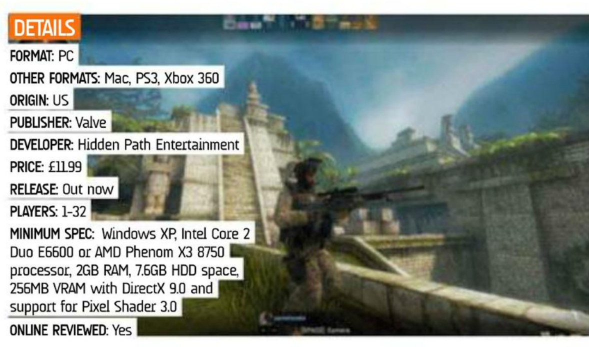
It doesn't take long to acclimatise to the changes, both superficial and deeper-seated. Cast your mind back to the launch of *CS: Source* and it's no surprise that its idiosyncrasies were easy to love, but in retrospect it felt more like an imitation. *Global Offensive* makes no such mistakes. The famed maps have been refined and tweaked. Perhaps the most noticeable is an additional staircase in Dust, but this isn't a blasphemous revision; rather it's a fresh perspective based on years of telemetry. Yes, it alters the map dynamic, but not in any overtly negative way. It's just different and we like it.

Weapons have been mostly left alone, albeit with a few name changes here and there. The most notable new addition is the Molotov cocktail/incendiary grenade that unleashes a huge spread of fire, perfect for blocking key avenues and rerouting enemies into your line of sight. Other inclusions are largely ignorable and even verge on trolling – the priciest weapon is a bizarre electric single-shot one-hit-kill taser. It's a testament to *CS*'s enduring appeal that the original vision remains so gloriously intact.

CS: GO stands as a glowing reminder that quality game design is rewarded in longevity. Valve has not only updated the shooter but has completely outclassed its contemporaries. This is *Counter-Strike*, whatever the format you choose to play it on, and there isn't a higher recommendation than that.



A SUBLIME REVISION OF THE GREATEST SHOOTER



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, PS3, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Valve
DEVELOPER: Hidden Path Entertainment
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-32
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, Intel Core 2 Duo E6600 or AMD Phenom X3 8750 processor, 2GB RAM, 7.6GB HDD space, 256MB VRAM with DirectX 9.0 and support for Pixel Shader 3.0
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

FAQs

Q. SO IT'S GREAT ON XBLA/PSN?
The controls aren't as slick, but this is everything you'd expect from *Counter-Strike* on a home console.

Q. WHAT ABOUT USER-GENERATED CONTENT?
From day one the servers were populated with custom maps. Valve also had a zombie mod ready to go from launch.

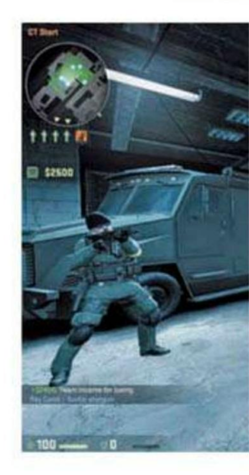
Q. HAS VALVE TAKEN ANYTHING OUT?
You can't select your character model any more and kill cam has been removed.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

LOOKING GOOD: The visuals are the equal of its competitors after the long-overdue graphical update.
MATCHMAKING: A concession to consoles but a boon all-round. PC players can still browse manually.

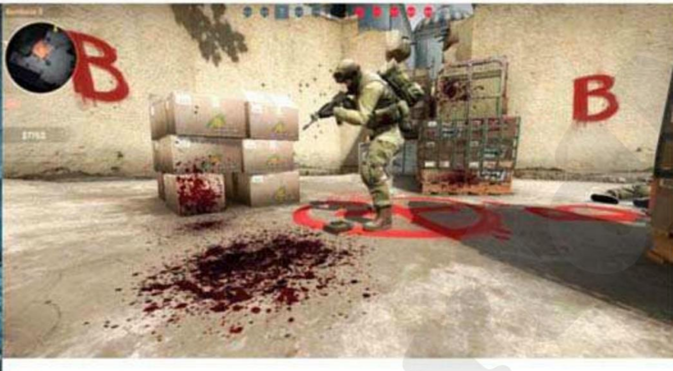
BETTER THAN: COUNTER-STRIKE: CONDITION ZERO
AS GOOD AS: COUNTER-STRIKE 1.6





Above: *Call Of Duty* players might find the considered pace of *Counter-Strike* frustrating, but patience pays dividends

IT'S THE MOST ELEGANTLY BALANCED, SKILL-ORIENTED AND THRILLING SHOOTER WE'VE HAD THE PLEASURE OF PLAYING FOR QUITE SOME TIME



Above: Dust and Dust II are still firm fan favourites. In fact, so popular are these two Middle Eastern maps, Valve has included matchmaking for Dust-only servers under the three main filtering options.

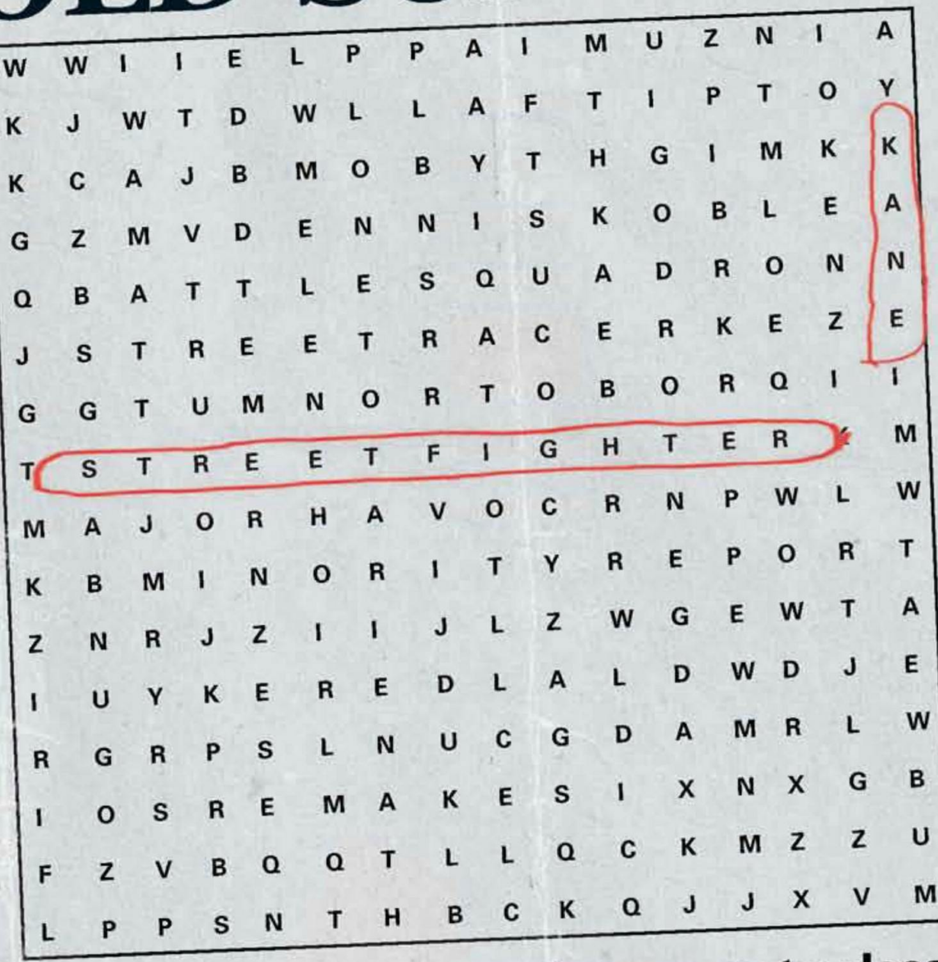
BEAT THE BOT

If you're petrified of stepping onto the servers for the first time for fear of being slaughtered like a turkey at Christmas, worry not, as you can get some hours in offline against bots. With variable difficulty level, you might be surprised to find that the AI poses a legitimate challenge to even the most experienced player. So much so, in fact, that bots are used to plug holes in online matches when there aren't enough human players present. It's not hugely noticeable, and dead players can jump into allied bots and continue playing. Not a major addition to *Global Offensive*, but a welcome one.

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SLIGHTLY MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Transformers: Fall Of Cybertron

Above: Call us old-fashioned, but we just can't get on with Optimus Prime's new truck form. Big rig all the way, clearly.

Making a *Transformers* game should be the exact opposite of making a superhero game. While trying to balance naturally unbalanced characters has made cape-wearing games notoriously tough to get right, it seems like it should be simple to get robots that can turn into vehicles to work in videogame form. But ever since the incomprehensible 8-bit attempt, precious few developers have risen to the challenge and created anything decent based on the property. The PS2 game is probably the best, but even that didn't get everything right, and following the adulation it received from fans, some of the mistakes it made have somehow become staples of a modern *Transformers* game. While robot and vehicle forms should offer combat and mobility respectively, it has become the norm to let both forms do both jobs, which kind of destroys any value in the primary selling point of the franchise.

Fall Of Cybertron doesn't just follow this trend – it could be the worst offender yet. Ever since some bright spark decided that cars could strafe, vehicle mode has just been another option in a fight, though not one that offers much beyond getting involved as a robot. But here, with a few Energon shards poured into the right perks, vehicle form becomes the go-to combat option, offering increased armour and far more effective weapons. Only the unique vehicles buck this trend, flying ones the clear highlight, as any level involving Transformers with the capacity for flight has been designed to offer multiple approaches and an open play space in which to enjoy this freedom.

It's a shame too, because the on-foot stuff is actually really good. Upgradeable weapons and abilities let you customise your loadout, while gunplay is surprisingly solid, though it is slightly jarring that enemies have a cover system with which to hide behind the waist-high walls that litter Cybertron and you don't. The split campaign has been done away with too, with one narrative that shows the action from both perspectives as it progresses. It's a strong campaign with set pieces on par with some of the better shooters of the last few years, and multiplayer is a full-featured and strangely addictive addition, even if the customisation falls a little short unless you're willing to stump up for the paid DLC parts.

High Moon is really starting to do the franchise justice. Despite the game's flaws, fans will surely find *Fall Of Cybertron* to be the best reflection of their beloved robots in disguise in many a year. Too bad it couldn't get Grimlock right, though…

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: High Moon Studios
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: TRANSFORMERS: WAR FOR CYBERTRON





WORSE THAN: GEARS OF WAR 3

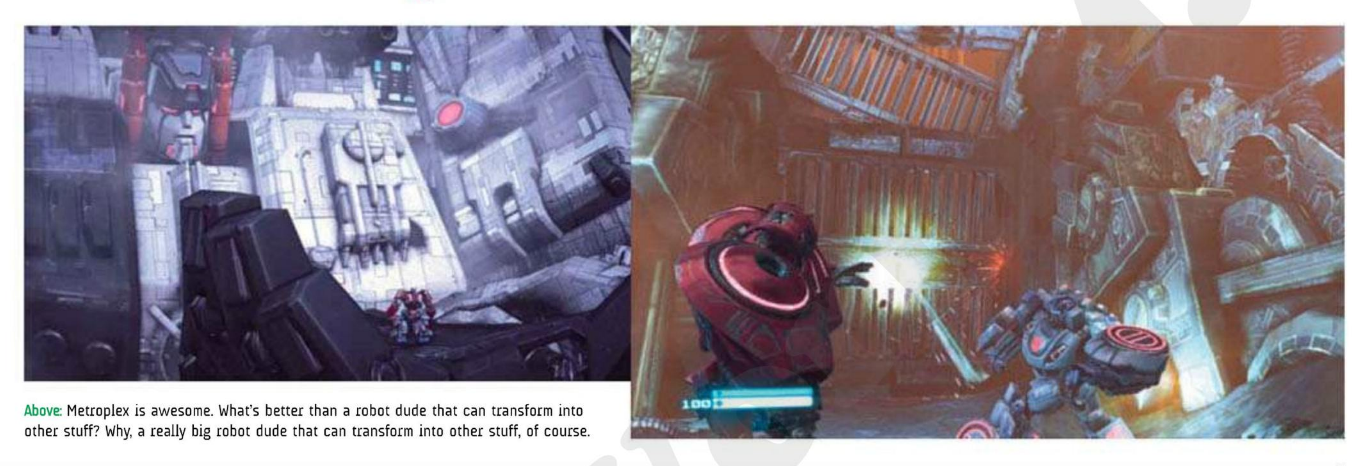
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TWO SIDES: Vehicle and robot form should both offer different gameplay benefits, but, as so often seems to be the case, there's little to differentiate the two beyond slightly different weapons.

VERDICT 7/10

BEST TRANSFORMERS GAME? IT'S A PRIME CANDIDATE

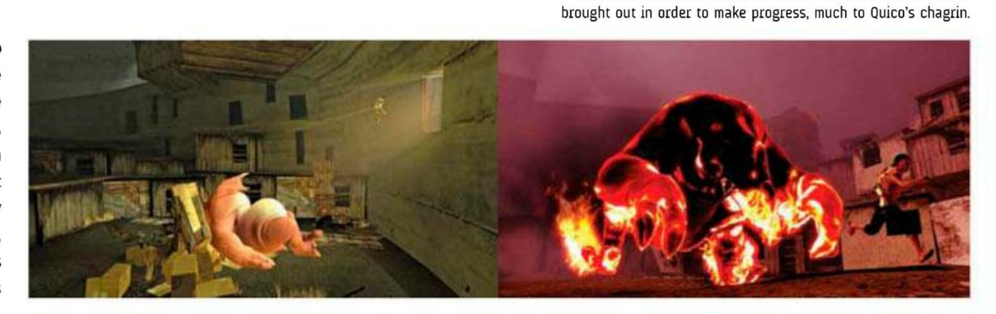


Above: Metroplex is awesome. What's better than a robot dude that can transform into other stuff? Why, a really big robot dude that can transform into other stuff, of course.

THE SINS OF THE FATHER SHALL BE VISITED UPON THE SON

Papo & Yo

Below: Monster will sometimes have to have his inner demon brought out in order to make progress, much to Quico's chagrin.



As videogames continue to mature, developers more frequently try to balance the importance of story in relation to actual gameplay. That challenge is no less pertinent when playing *Papo & Yo*, a puzzle-centric adventure from the small team at Minority Media that balances game and story, sadness and wonder. Schoolboy Quico finds himself in a fantasy world that resembles his own, led through it by a playful girl, his toy robot-cum-jetpack Lula, and the ever-present Monster, a pinkish ogre whom Quico will need to rely on to get past most of the game's puzzles. Monster is fairly selfish, napping on cardboard and otherwise preoccupied with munching on fruit, and if he eats a most-delicious frog, he turns nasty and will chase Quico like an enraged bull until he's calmed down by special blue fruits. It's not always pleasant, but Quico has to deal with it for just a little while longer as he leads Monster to this world's high shaman and attempts to cure him of his destructive ways.

Quico's solution is simple and appropriately childlike, which dovetails with the game's message. Much has been made of *Papo & Yo*'s allegory for creator Vander Caballero's rough childhood with his dependent and abusive father, to the point where you may expect it to saturate the game. Despite that inelegant promotion, that's not the case; the point is properly subdued, and not every question gets an explicit answer. In other words, don't think you'll be force-fed melodrama every step of the way – if you do get a little emotional, chances are it's going to be all you.

What *Papo & Yo* lacks in exposition, it makes up in imaginative imagery. The relatively realistic favela backdrops are manipulated throughout the game's puzzles, with magical chalk drawings acting as switches and gears that can let houses sprout legs and walk, flip or bend around in order to create or clear paths. Though hint boxes are readily available, most of the puzzles are straightforward and shouldn't keep you bogged down, save for two or three that mark big moments in the story. Yet that's where the 'game' part starts to drift away; wonderment aside, those not tuned in to the subtext may feel unchallenged.

In addition, some technical problems can put you off the whole thing, as Quico may fall through the world or Monster become unresponsive, forcing you to reload the last checkpoint, though in our playthroughs, those were isolated moments in between solving puzzles. *Papo & Yo* is otherwise cohesive, however, and a few rough edges don't detract from an adventure that is as emotional as it is brain-teasing, and is worth experiencing whether or not you can relate to the subject matter.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Minority Media
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

CATHERINE



WORSE THAN



ICO

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

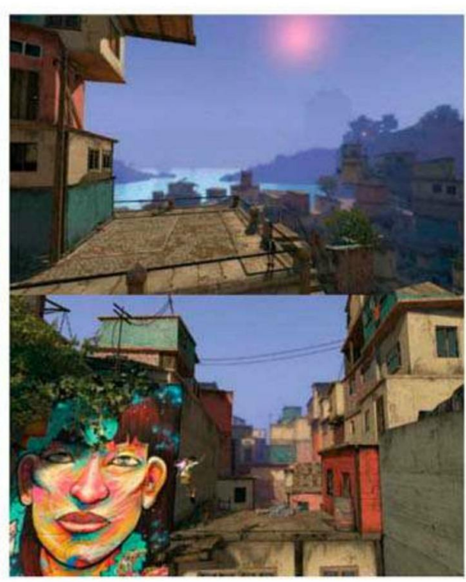
FAVELA FLAVOUR: Clumps of shanties are everywhere in *Papo & Yo*, often with beautiful murals. It's imagery as frequent and iconic as question blocks in *Mario*, though a bit more sobering.



VERDICT 7/10

A BALANCING ACT IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE





Above: Disney-like imagination is often on display as well as at play. Multiple bright moments ease the game's otherwise sombre tale.

A COVER SHOOTER IN THE TRUEST SENSE OF THE WORD

Hybrid

5th Cell doesn't do things by the book. Now famous for *Scribblenauts*, a game that, at its core, was as interesting or as entertaining as your imagination allowed it to be, its first foray into the world of the third-person shooter is just as offbeat. Persistently online and arranging its warfare on a foundation of three-on-three gameplay, *Hybrid* shapes its entire experience around the idea that two factions are fighting over a supply of dark matter. Even if you're not directly involved with the combat, anyone actively participating in a match will be influencing whether the Variants (bad guys) or Paladins (good guys) are winning the battle.

5th Cell tries to make a bigger deal of this aspect than is actually necessary – once you get into the nitty gritty of what *Hybrid* has to offer, the fundamentals are far more rooted in the shooting aspects of the game. Interestingly, though, while inspired by other cover shooters that already exist, the developer has decided to stick to this framework rigidly. You may be able to fly from one cover point to the next, but there's no way to roam around freely. Sure, while airborne there's a certain degree of freedom, but you're constantly lining up a reticle to blast yourself from one wall to the next. Although the concept is solid, it sparks a host of issues that do have the potential to frustrate.



Below: Level design is *Hybrid*'s biggest issue, boasting hardly any unique or defining features regardless of which part of the map you battle on. This is mostly down to the over-emphasis on cover, giving the developer no real way to experiment with its setting.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: 5th Cell
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 1,200 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



The first is how it impacts level design. 5th Cell has no choice but to build every map around blocks of cover, meaning they all very quickly blend into one, with no real standout or exciting elements. Next is how fiddly and frustrating the control scheme can be, given the layout. Naturally, it becomes far more agreeable the more time you invest in *Hybrid*, but in a fast-paced, competitive online environment there's certainly a fair amount of confusion as you try to keep up with its speed. It also doesn't help that XP upgrades, which can drastically evolve and improve your character, can be bought, rather than earned, through the Marketplace.

Ultimately, it's a case of theory over execution. *Hybrid* is certainly not a bad game, but its apparent depth actually soon gives way to a very familiar online template, and its unique setup will definitely not be for everyone. 5th Cell deserves credit for daring to embrace cover in such a fashion, but it still feels like something is missing from its grand idea. There's a slight risk involved for the developer, given that *Hybrid* has been priced at the upper end of Xbox Live Arcade's structure – 800 Points would have been a far more appealing and likely impulse purchase – but it remains an anomaly on the service that should create quite the debate.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DEATH MATCHED: There are plenty of modes on offer in *Hybrid*, but for one reason or another it constantly falls back on team deathmatch. Using its variety would have made a lot more sense.

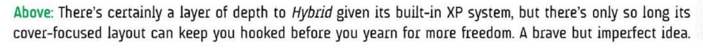


VERDICT 6/10

AN INTERESTING, IF FLAWED, COVER SHOOTER







Above: There's certainly a layer of depth to *Hybrid* given its built-in XP system, but there's only so long its cover-focused layout can keep you hooked before you yearn for more freedom. A brave but imperfect idea.



Left: The engine can't handle much without getting choppy, encouraging players out to sea just for a relatively stable frame rate.

MAD CATZ SPREADS ITS WINGS

Damage Inc: Pacific Squadron WWII

It should come as no surprise to see that peripheral manufacturer Mad Catz's first foray into videogame publishing has yielded a game that's substantially better when played with its old-school joystick. It's been a few years since we wrapped our hands around anything but a pad, but after a few moments adjusting to *Damage Inc*'s hefty controller, memories of *X-Wing vs TIE Fighter* come flooding back. And, if *Damage Inc* proves anything, it's that flight games, whether simulation or arcade-focused, are at their best when played with a joystick.

Of course, there's a reason why the joystick was phased out of modern gaming. Played with any other genre it's just impractical, but its use here cements *Damage Inc*'s nostalgia-laden action. This is a game with two feet firmly planted in the thrills of yesteryear, and compared with the flight genre's recent output, Mad Catz's game just can't compete.

Damage Inc focuses its attention on the Pacific Theatre of World War II, beginning with the attack on Pearl Harbor, but beyond re-creating the odd spit of land, it offers little more than huge expanses of open water. It can't maintain a consistent frame rate with large numbers of planes in the air, and when bulky landmasses are added to the mix, stuttering and jerking are commonplace. It's odd too, as ground detail is minimal and even cloud density is sparse on most levels. It's not clear why *Damage Inc* struggles quite so much when it's rendering so little.

Gameplay is also an awkward mix of arcade flight and simulation, falling very much into the arcade camp. We've been treated to the explosive aerial acrobatics of *Ace Combat: Assault Horizon* of late, and though most games seem tame by comparison, Project Aces did manage to do away with the flight genre's biggest problem. Unfortunately, that's exactly the issue that arises here: chasing dots and flying in circles is the outcome of any dogfight in *Damage Inc*, and it quickly gets dull. Though it does explore the usual array of US Navy bombers and fighters, gameplay never rises above the mediocre.

When it is fun, it's in a way that flying games were ten years ago, and with an assortment of bugs and graphical glitches, Mad Catz's first game isn't quite as well put together as its peripherals, then. The whole experience is unnecessarily tied to the accompanying joystick, too. There's a selection of buttons that enable game-enhancing abilities, such as bullet time or extra speed, but these fall flat, adding little to the combat. Played with a pad, these issues are exacerbated, and, though enjoyable, *Damage Inc* falls in line with the flight games of a few years ago, bringing nothing new or exciting. When we've seen the genre pushed in such interesting directions, there's no room for backward-looking games like this.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Mad Catz
DEVELOPER: Trickstar Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: OVER G FIGHTERS



WORSE THAN: ACE COMBAT: ASSAULT HORIZON

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

HANDS-ON: Although it's available on its own, *Damage Inc* is all about the bundled flight stick, supposedly based on real controls of the era and putting Mad Catz's traditional strengths to good use.



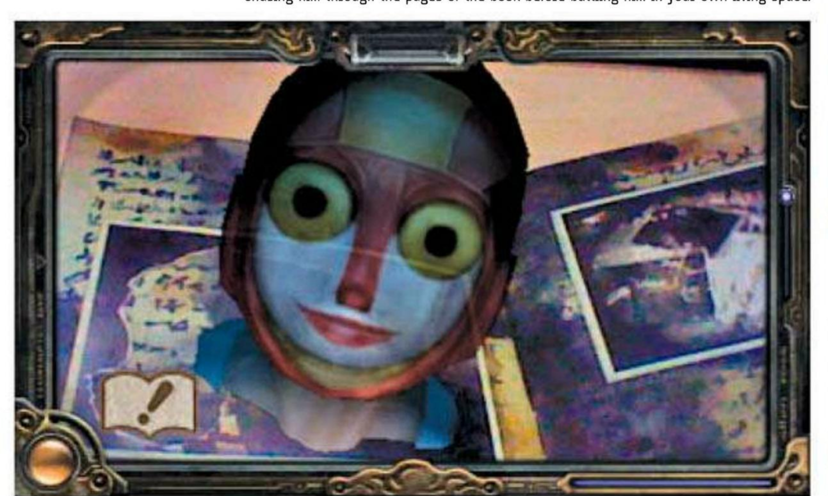
VERDICT 5/10
BIGGLES FLIES AGAIN. BRIEFLY





Above: The terrain is dull, even compared to other games in a genre notorious for cardboard scenery. Here's hoping that next generation's hardware will be a boon to flight sims.

Below: This mischievous tyke plays a few games of hide and seek involving players chasing him through the pages of the book before battling him in your own living space.





LENS SCARE

Spirit Camera: The Cursed Memoir

The true triumph of the *Project Zero* series to date has been its ability to precisely home in on the chilling simplicity of early J-horror cinema. In much the same way that *Ringu* transformed the centrepiece of the living room into a blood-curdling deadly device, *Project Zero* utilised an everyday camera as a lens into our deepest fears and made the act of taking a photograph truly frightening.

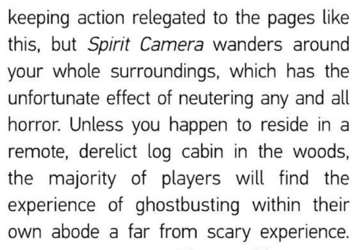
Spirit Camera: The Cursed Memoir is a (super)natural evolution of this inspired conceit. With the mysterious 'camera obscura' in the player's hands, your surroundings are inhabited by wayward spirits and evil spectres thanks to some well-implemented AR tech and a creepy notebook that comes with the cartridge.

During the story mode, you soon discover that the owner of this diary is a stray soul named Maya, who has little memory of her grave circumstances and can only recall her name. She acts as a guide through the book, forewarning players of the maleficent woman in black, who resides within the pages, but her otherworldly wisdom rarely stretches beyond simple observations and exposition as you connect pieces of eerie transcripts and unscramble unsettling imagery found on each page.

Flat characterisation notwithstanding, the ambient frights so masterfully crafted in *The Cursed Memoir*'s predecessors fizzle within the handheld offspring. The horror is unquestionably most potent when the 3DS remains static on an image, and one particularly effective segment of the story turns a ghostly image into a gateway to the spirit world. Here, a door featuring bloody handprints blocks progress and prods players to outstretch their hand, only for the claws of some undead creature to come lurching towards the player through the screen.

Tecmo Koei would have been better keeping action relegated to the pages like this, but *Spirit Camera* wanders around your whole surroundings, which has the unfortunate effect of neutering any and all horror. Unless you happen to reside in a remote, derelict log cabin in the woods, the majority of players will find the experience of ghostbusting within their own abode a far from scary experience. The problems are compounded by misjudged ghost battles that bookend story chapters, wherein you must chase a spirit around the room and build enough power to vanquish them from the world. It's a chore that inspires dread for all the wrong reasons.

Where the *Project Zero* series previously transported players into a tightly orchestrated atmosphere where chills were easily maintained, *Spirit Camera* falters by relying on the illusion-shattering parameters of your own location. There's no shortage of ideas on display, featuring some of the best utilisation of AR tech on the handheld to date, but ultimately the use of the 3DS hardware feels more like a curse for the franchise than a blessing.



DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Tecmo Koei
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: SILENT HILL: HOMECOMING

WORSE THAN: FATAL FRAME

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

KLAATU BARADA NIKTO: The tricks conjured from the mysterious book are most impressive. It also utilises the 3D screen to send various characters leaping out at the player for a quick shock.







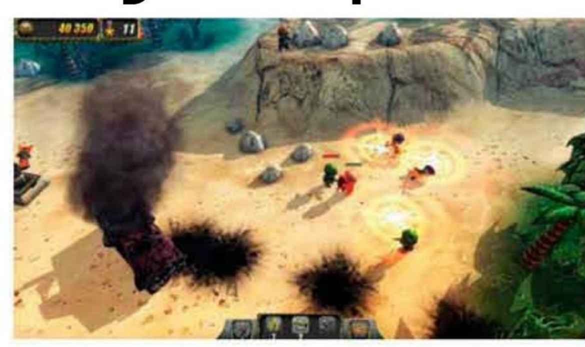


VERDICT 6/10

FAILS TO FOCUS IN ON THE TERROR

WAR HAS CERTAINLY BEEN MORE FUN THAN THIS

Tiny Troopers





Above: One of the nicer touches of *Tiny Troopers* is the inclusion of various villagers, who are happily going about their business. Shoot them and you'll lose precious points, which are needed to level up your soldiers at the beginning of each new round.

You have to feel sorry for Codemasters. In the very month it unleashes the third instalment of its cherished *Cannon Fodder* franchise, Finnish developer Kukouri comes along with its own clone that, while not perfect, is a huge improvement over Burut CT's series revival.

Tiny Troopers started off life as an iOS game, and its huge success there has seen it get quickly ported to the PC. Unfortunately, little has been done to take advantage of the benefits offered by a desktop computer, so we're treated to a quick and dirty port that currently lacks the fun extras, such as the new Zombie Survival mode, readily available in the admittedly enjoyable iOS game.

As with the original *Cannon Fodder*, you're thrown into a war zone with a rag-tag bag of soldiers and then given a variety of tasks that range from protecting journalists to taking down a specific number of enemy installations and weapon bases. Pointing and clicking with the left mouse button moves your cute soldiers around the level, while using the right button lays down fire. You can also hold it down for a continuous stream of death but are unable to move when doing so. It's possible to use grenades and other destructive weapons, while handy intel and additional items can be bought during play, providing you have the actual funds to buy them.

You can equip your soldiers with a variety of weapon enhancements at the start of each mission, and can improve your chances of survival by adding specialists that range from power-boosting grenadiers to useful medics who will continually heal wounded soldiers. These additional troops will only join you on the current mission, though, and they put a huge drain on your resources, which is a throwback to the in-app purchase model of the original game.

The controls and structure throughout *Tiny Troopers* are slick and streamlined, allowing anyone to instantly get to grips with things and get stuck in to *Tiny Troopers*' 30 varied missions. Sadly, it's here where things start to fall apart, and the game's mobile roots begin to make an unwelcome appearance.

While there is a fair amount of variety to the 30 available missions, the enemy AI is far from challenging, meaning most stages can be easily romped through with very little effort. Other irksome issues are the inability to scroll around the map, which cuts out any chance of forming strategies, and the way later levels simply throw large numbers of enemies at you to counterbalance the inept AI. The humour feels forced as well, while the level design is bland and uninteresting.

Tiny Troopers works well and is perfectly priced on mobile devices, but it loses some of its identity now that it's scaled up for the PC. It's still miles better than Burut CT's miserable effort, though.

VERDICT 6/10
A FUN CLONE, BETTER SUITED TO THE SMALL SCREEN

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: iOS
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Iceberg Interactive
DEVELOPER: Kukouri
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, Intel Core 2 Duo 1.8GHz, 2GB RAM, 256MB HD 2600, 500MB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE: There's a really enjoyable Zombie Survival mode that has been added to the iOS version. We're hoping it eventually makes its way across to the PC build.

Below: Enemies will often attack en masse on later stages. You'll feel hopelessly overwhelmed rather than challenged, though. This trick is repeated on higher difficulty levels as well, so never stay in one place for too long.





A JOURNEY BOTH STRANGE AND FAMILIAR

Unchained Blades

DETAILS
FORMAT: PSP
OTHER FORMATS: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Xseed Games
DEVELOPER: FuRyu
PRICE: $29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Those who recently enjoyed the rather retrograde stylings of first-person PC dungeon-crawler *Legend Of Grimrock* may well be surprised to learn that the genre has already experienced something of a renaissance. Titles like *Etrian Odyssey*, *Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey* and *Class Of Heroes* have enjoyed moderate success in Japan and earned a niche following elsewhere. Xseed's digital-only release is cut from a similar cloth. A lengthy and unforgiving quest awaits dungeoneers, but those who brave its labyrinths will return with tales of a memorable journey.

Not that you'd think so from an opening hour that rather clumsily introduces the major players in brief, stilted prologues while interrupting the action frequently with archaic text tutorials. It's a woefully disjointed and off-putting start, but persevere and you'll be drawn into its intricate web of systems.

Its protagonist, Fang, is an initially unlikable lead, an arrogant half-man/half-dragon who is relieved of his beastly adult form for his insolence towards the goddess Clunea. Vowing to fight his way back to her so that she may grant his wish to become the world's most powerful being, he's forced to conquer a series of living dungeons known as Titans to achieve his goal. It's an interesting setup that slowly brings in more characters with their own reasons for visiting the deity, from a sickly soldier to a winged princess who harbours the bizarre ambition to become a dragon. The cast is brought to life with some sterling vocal talent, and while the dialogue occasionally has the whiff of a Saturday morning cartoon, it's sporadically witty with some intriguing character beats.

In truth, the story can fade into the background for long stretches, particularly in the first dungeon, which is unusually substantial, particularly when juxtaposed with the much shorter second. It's something of a baptism of fire, but its uncommonly hard-



Above: Each follower carries a certain cost, the total of which must be less than the master's capacity, which grows over time. You can team up with individual followers to perform special Link skills, but only if they possess a similar Anima.

Below: Occasionally you'll be attacked by so many enemies at once that they take up multiple screens. It's best to store a full Burst gauge to use your powerful skills for these encounters.



FAQs

Q. FREQUENT ENCOUNTERS?
Not by JRPG standards. You'll often be able to walk at least a dozen steps before being accosted.

Q. POST-GAME CONTENT?
You'd better believe it. An additional tower that will take weeks to best.

Q. BEST CHARACTER?
Hector, an unusually timid metal golem who wears a tiny red bow tie.

Below: Within each Titan you'll find a set number of camps, where you can rest and heal without returning to town. If you're short of MP, however, you'll have to exit and pay to spend the night at the inn.



A LENGTHY AND UNFORGIVING QUEST AWAITS DUNGEONEERS, BUT THOSE WHO BRAVE UNCHAINED BLADES' LABYRINTHS WILL RETURN WITH TALES OF A MEMORABLE JOURNEY

nosed approach has benefits: rather than lulling you into a false sense of security, it allows you to get accustomed to regularly setting up camp, to returning to the safety of town to rest up at the inn, or simply to be saving more frequently. In a game where even a small group of bog-standard enemies can take down half your party without much trouble, its tough-love methodology proves effective in teaching you the ropes.

You'll be forced to head back to base fairly frequently, then, and that's partly because the tangle of ideas here threatens to overwhelm as much as the bigger monsters do. Most of them may be familiar, but they're combined in unusual ways and can appear more complex than they really are. Its recruitment system is a case in point. An Unchain – the process by which a beast is essentially brainwashed into joining you – is only possible when an animal is below half health, and even then only appears occasionally. While lesser creatures are easily captured by securing a gradually diminishing circle within a larger ring, more powerful allies require a more intricate method of capture, with each circle having to fall within the previous one.

Each critter then has to be allocated to a master, and these followers will automatically act during a skirmish, either following an attack with one of their own, or leaping in front to deflect an incoming blow. Animals with a certain affinity will be able to help out with more powerful Link Skills, and you can converse with them after battle or on sundry other occasions to increase their happiness rating, thus making them more efficient in the fight. The idea is to choose the most charismatic answer to win their approval, the phrase 'animal magnetism' being particularly pertinent in light of your hero's condition.

In Judgment Battles, meanwhile, all your followers face off against an enemy's allies, which sometimes spread across several screens. These curious interludes ask you to press directional buttons as icons pass through a central marker, as if playing a rhythm-action game. Jewels and special Master attacks can help turn the tide, while the occasional one-on-one encounter requires a few seconds of button-mashing to push your opponent back. It's an odd choice for the more important story battles, not least because it looks so messy, sprites colliding awkwardly in the middle of the screen, soundtracked by howls, shrieks and grunts.

It's a pity, as otherwise the 2D artwork is fine. A little static, perhaps, but the disparate art styles from the range of anime artists used lends the game a degree of visual variety without any jarring inconsistencies. The dungeons are a little rougher by comparison, though the size of the characters and monsters is such that the backgrounds are often almost entirely obscured. A note, too, for the soundtrack from Nobuo Uematsu's protégé, Tsutomu Narita, who here essays his master's style almost effortlessly. Uematsu himself contributes the title theme; tellingly, it's hard to separate that from the themes that follow, even if there aren't quite enough to stretch over 60 hours.

Unchained Blades is not without its frustrations. The Unchain mechanic is unreasonably capricious, the early pacing in particular is erratic, and its inventory limitations seem unfairly punitive. Anyone with an aversion to backtracking, meanwhile, would be advised to leave well alone. Even so, the rewards for those prepared to grit their teeth and force their way through the occasional brick wall are satisfying enough to make this a quest worth accepting.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FOLLOWER FRUSTRATION: It's a pity you don't have any control over followers beyond your affinity with them. Until you do, expect the odd meaningless sacrifice punctuating periods of inactivity.

THRILLS AND SKILLS

The game's skill map takes its cues from *Final Fantasy X*'s Sphere Grid system, and affords the player a surprisingly broad range of options for each character. It comprises a series of interconnected rings that host a set of buffs, stat boosts and additional abilities, with two new options available for every level you gain. Take every spot within a ring and you'll unlock the central ability, often a unique or particularly powerful skill. The number of paths open to you – particularly once you progress close to the centre of the ring cluster – can seem overwhelming, but it's refreshing to have the opportunity to truly tailor a character to your own individual combat style rather than being guided down a specific route.





VERDICT 7/10

DEEP AND CRISP AND UNEVEN





Right: The game gives you a Limit Point total for each mortal coil, which increases as you complete commissions. By fulfilling certain conditions, you can decrease the points tally, allowing you to achieve more in one lifetime.

IS IT TIME FOR THIS SERIES TO 'AVE A REST?

Agarest: Generations Of War 2

Any role-playing game lives or dies on the quality of its battle system and its characterisation. Some would argue the importance of story, but most games can survive a slavish adherence to familiar tropes – like, for example, the amnesiac protagonist slowly fulfilling his ultimate destiny – as long as they have likeable, engaging leads with whom players are happy to spend the next 20-plus hours journeying. Sadly, *Agarest: Generations Of War 2* fails on both counts, with any original ideas buried under a mess of ponderous dialogue, poor presentation and confusing systems.

Its tactical combat bravely ignores the setup of the previous *Agarest* games, taking its cues from developer Idea Factory's *Cross Edge*. It's a fine plan in theory, and there's a range of strategic possibilities in its grid-based formation system and the network of skills available to your four-strong team. The face buttons handle different moves, from ground-based assaults to juggles and ranged attacks, and you can string together spectacular extended attacks, switching in team members with the D-pad, as the hit meter ticks into three figures.

Alas, any further complexities are detailed in a ludicrous barrage of text after the practical explanations of its most basic ideas, meaning that many of the nuances are all too easy to miss. Feedback, too, is poor, often leaving it unclear whether your attacks are having the desired effect. Occasionally characters will be dragged out of formation with no real reason given for leaving them in a position of extreme vulnerability. It's only with several hours of experimentation that it begins to make sense.

Elsewhere, the game's pacing proves slow, with sluggish character movement in the field and laboured transitions for anything from dialogue to post-battle victory screens. A lightweight relationship mechanic is then rendered meaningless by allowing you to choose a bride regardless of affinity. That might not be a problem if the game's treatment of its female cast wasn't so offensive – one lead appears to have wandered in from a fetish club, the developer more keen to animate her heaving bosom than develop her character. The sole use of Move, meanwhile, is in a trio of tawdry mini-games designed to offer some half-hearted titillation and nothing more.

There's plenty of content for those who persevere, with two descendants of sullen protagonist Weiss to play as, though only those with saintly patience and a high tolerance for tedious smut will see beyond the first generation. And though its lacklustre presentation betrays its modest budget, it only excuses so much. Despite a decent battle system and some occasionally inventive enemy design, *Agarest: Generations Of War 2* serves only to provide JRPG critics with more evidence that the genre is stagnating.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Ghostlight
DEVELOPER: Idea Factory/ Red Entertainment
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

HYPERDIMENSION NEPTUNIA

BETTER THAN



WORSE THAN

TRINITY UNIVERSE

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

FIGHT FANS: The *Cross Edge*-inspired battle system is a definite step up from the original game and its prequel, *Agarest: Generations Of War Zero*. It's just a pity about everything else.







VERDICT 3/10
ANOTHER FACTORY-LINE CLUNKER



Left: There are enough similarities and call-backs to the original games that this is absolutely, definitely a *Cannon Fodder* game. But it's a weak facsimile rather than a purebred sequel.

BETTER TO LEAVE THIS LYING IN ITS UNIFORM, DYING IN THE SUN

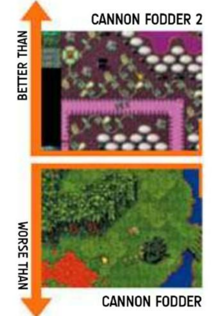
Cannon Fodder 3

It was never the unlikeliest of sequels, but *Cannon Fodder 3* came about in the unlikeliest of ways. Licensed from Codemasters, owner of the Sensible Software property, developed by Russian studio Burut CT and, eventually, released worldwide by Game Factor Interactive, it's not had the most straightforward or auspicious routes to our PCs. And, in fact, some might wonder why it ever got beyond the borders of Mother Russia at all.

For you see, this is a *Cannon Fodder*-shaped shell. It's a husk that certainly looks the part, if you squint and only observe it from certain angles. Those who made it have clearly played the originals: it's a top-down, squad-based shooter where you control four fragile troops taking on near-insurmountable odds. Grenades are thrown, buildings are demolished, unfair deaths are had, vehicles are miscontrolled, and it all comes together in a package that feels like it was made by people who knew what *Cannon Fodder* was.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Russia
PUBLISHER: Game Factor Interactive
DEVELOPER: Burut CT
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, Pentium 4 2.4GHz, 1GB RAM, GeForce 7800GTX/Radeon X1800 XT, Direct X 9.0c, 700MB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



But it doesn't feel like it was made by a team that knows what a new *Cannon Fodder* should be. Unimpressive updated graphics and the addition of side missions aren't exactly revolutionary additions to a 20-year-old formula, and technical hitches and general bad design hinder what can, sometimes, end up being decent fun.

It could be the enemies who rush in and stand so close to your troops that you genuinely can't distinguish them, meaning you might mistakenly think you are safe – all energy bars look the same, of course. It might be vehicles that have pathfinding skills worse than those in the original. It might be the combinations of these elements; or the sudden appearance of troops who take out your entire squad; or the explosive hitting nothing straight in front of you and killing everyone; or the way a checkpoint doesn't auto-save, requiring an extra click for no reason; or the questionable taste of having some exploding troops 'hit' the screen and be wiped off with windscreen wipers.

Or it might be that *Cannon Fodder 3* just isn't much fun. Its repetitive nature borders on the ridiculous, with objectives repeating over and again, and there is pretty much nothing that pushes you on to finish it. There are times when nostalgia wins out, when you realise this is an actual *Cannon Fodder* sequel, but that's quickly squashed down and washed away by a glitchy, boring and hugely underwhelming experience. In fairness, it's nowhere near as bad as might have been expected. But saying that about a game doesn't mean it's at all good.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

ONE-MAN ARMY: Nope. We tried, we tried and we tried again to play any game, at all, of multiplayer *Cannon Fodder 3* online. Nobody is playing it. In the world. At all.

VERDICT 3/10
WAR WAS ONCE A LOT MORE FUN



Above: There's a question of taste to certain elements of the game – though that does just fit with the whole ethos of *Cannon Fodder*. There is absolutely no sign of a poppy or mention of the Royal British Legion, though, at least.



IN CYBERSPACE, NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU YAWN

Hyperdimension Neptunia Mk2

Above: "Gamindustri faces a dire crisis," booms the intro text without any trace of irony. Games like this only reinforce Western preconceptions of the Japanese market.

Let's face it: no one buys games like *Hyperdimension Neptunia Mk2* for their inventive retooling of genre standards, nor the quality of their narrative. The clammy-palmed audience for Idea Factory's brand of smut will probably delight in hearing that the cast of this most unwanted of sequels appears younger, more bouncy and more underdressed than ever. Meanwhile, there are clear sapphic undertones to the Lily Rank relationship system, a mechanic apparently less concerned with exploring the nuances of an LGBT partnership than offering additional opportunities to titillate. There is clearly an audience for this kind of thing, and it would be hard to argue it's not reasonably well served here.

Elsewhere, there are evident improvements to the first game's battle system, though in truth it would be hard to conceive of a worse one. Characters are now able to move freely during encounters, which, rather than occurring randomly, are player-prompted. The infuriating random healing that blighted the original has been mercifully excised, and if regular enemies often succumb to nothing more tactical than an all-out assault, boss encounters require a more careful, strategic approach, with character positioning key to success. The various face buttons offer different styles of attack, from rush moves that prioritise hit count over damage, to guard-breakers that can leave opponents vulnerable. These can be combined skilfully to produce devastating multi-hit moves that may not be particularly spectacular to behold but are occasionally satisfying to pull off.

Otherwise, it's the same blend of slapdash ideas and witless humour that characterised the first game. Evidently, Idea Factory subscribes to the *Scary Movie* rulebook of comedy, assuming that simply making references to games is hilarious in itself. This is a series that thinks calling cities Lastation and Leanbox is the very height of satire. Former Capcom producer Keiji Inafune appears both on an in-game chat channel and as a special summon for protagonist Nepgear, his presence alone apparently deemed enough to provoke laughter.

The story, meanwhile, degenerates into a series of fetch quests that do nothing to hide the inherent repetition in its structure. The tone is irritatingly shrill throughout, while portraits during conversations switch between high-quality anime art and low-res character models without rhyme or reason. And while Chirper, the aforementioned social network, seems like a decent idea in theory, it's simply a mess of links to click through until you fortuitously trigger an event that increases character affinity. In other words, even those playing one-handed have a lot of work before they get to the good stuff. We take no pleasure in chiding the publisher for bothering to localise, and NIS America deserves credit for having brought over some fine Japanese games to the West, but it would do well to wash its hands of this grot.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: NIS America
DEVELOPER: Idea Factory
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: HYPERDIMENSION NEPTUNIA



AS BAD AS: AGAREST: GENERATIONS OF WAR 2

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TACTICS ADVANCED: It may be damning with faint praise, but the battle system is a definite change for the better. It has a few awkward idiosyncrasies, but there's genuine depth here.



VERDICT 3/10
A BORINGLY BAWDY JRPG, DEVOID OF CHARM OR WIT



Above: You'll earn three Trophies before even moving the left analogue stick, an apparent reward for sitting through the extended non-interactive opening.


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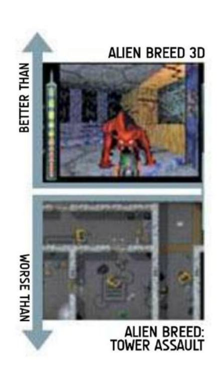
NOW WITH A LITTLE LESS BITE

Alien Breed

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Team17
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £1.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: iOS 3.0
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
ALIEN BREED 3D



WORSE THAN
ALIEN BREED: TOWER ASSAULT

More than just a port of an old game, but not quite a remake, this update of the 1990 Amiga classic is one of the most affectionate you're likely to find on iOS. Included in the app is all six stages from the first *Alien Breed*, the 12 stages from its 1992 special edition and a further four created especially for this app. Every single one of these is playable in the original Amiga presentation but can also be played in an updated guise, including glossier visuals and new twin-stick controls that make the game play like the modern *Alien Breed* series, allowing you to finally walk backwards and shoot after all these years.

The best thing about this release, however, is that it has been rebalanced so that the difficulty curve doesn't climb to a vertical ascent as soon as you hit the second stage. The Intex computers that once sold you extra keys, health and weapons are gone in favour of a store you can access all the time, which also includes fairly priced in-app purchases so you can get the best weapons early if you like, but the game is also more generous with its own currency, making it harder to run out of keys and effectively dead-end yourself.

Alien Breed was always a great game, a clever take on *Gauntlet* that was one of the first games to make being overwhelmed feel thrilling. But it was a game that few people saw through to its finale. With these subtle alterations, we finally get to enjoy every bit of its greatness right through to the end.

Below: The original game's co-op play is missing but could theoretically be added in the future. More gutting is the loss of the computer voice that says, "Welcome to Intex Systems."



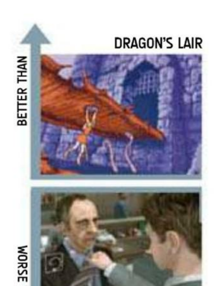


A GREAT GAME, MADE MORE ACCESSIBLE

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: US/Canada
PUBLISHER: Chillingo
DEVELOPER: React Entertainment
PRICE: £0.69
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: iOS 4.0
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
DRAGON'S LAIR



WORSE THAN
HEAVY RAIN

THE INTERACTIVE CARTOON RETURNS

The Act

The idea of an interactive cartoon pretty much began and ended with the divisive *Dragon's Lair* in 1983, but perhaps it didn't have to be that way. *The Act*, created this year, shows what might have been possible if developers had stuck with the idea.

Unlike *Dragon's Lair*, this tale of a man who pretends to be a doctor in order to get close to the woman of his dreams is less about hitting buttons at the right time and more about using analogue inputs to live naturally within a scene. The only control is the touch screen, which can be swiped gently or quickly either left or right. Each scene is context sensitive, but the general idea is to gauge each situation and try to act in a way that's appropriate. The opening scene captures this idea perfectly as you attempt to catch the attention of a woman in a bar, gently flirting by gradually making incremental advances toward her, making sure not to take it too far.

Later scenes build upon the premise and occasionally wrap more arcade-style action around the controls, but *The Act* is at its best when it's dealing with scenes concerning human interaction and emotion. It can feel a bit like trial and error, of course, but the game remains engaging throughout and, much like *Dragon's Lair*, the high-quality animations keep it entertaining even when you fail.

Above all else, however, *The Act* stands as an example of what more there is to be achieved in game design and may just hold the key to where emotional connection, human subtlety and AI interaction could head in the future. Until then, we've at least got this living work of classic-feeling animation to keep us thoroughly amused.



Above: *The Act* makes itself more accessible than most games in its genre, with easily digestible chapters plus plenty of checkpoints and extra lives.

VERDICT 7/10
A CLASS ACT

"FLY, FATASS, FLY!"

Jay & Silent Bob In: Too Fat To Fly

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Ice Cap Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £0.69
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: iOS 5
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A


BETTER THAN: JAY & SILENT BOB IN: LET US DANCE
WORSE THAN: CRAZY PENGUIN CATAPULT

Back in September 2010, Kevin Smith (director of *Clerks*, *Chasing Amy* and so on) found fame of a different kind when he was thrown off a Southwest Airlines flight after the pilot deemed him a 'safety risk' because of his size. In the aftermath, Smith recovered by mounting a protest on Twitter and subsequently slimming down, but his most recent coping strategy is by far the most interesting. Taking his personal problem as the inspiration for a videogame, Smith has helped create that rarest of game: an interactive re-appropriation.

Too Fat To Fly is hardly social commentary, though. It's not even much of an autobiographical comment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the people involved, it's just a bit of harmless fun. A derivative catapult game not entirely unlike the similar Flash games that were popular during the late Nineties, it has you firing a rotund cartoon version of Smith's on-screen alias, Silent Bob, across a shopping mall with the aim of seeing how far you can send him.

Online leaderboards, achievements and in-game currency are the rewards for flinging the fat man as far as possible, and that currency can be used to buy upgrades or gadgets that will help Bob once he's in the air. Tapping the screen while airborne will set off a little explosion that either bounces Bob further or destroys an obstacle, but apart from that there's little to actually do here, and much of the gameplay comes down to accumulating coins through repetition.

The trouble is the game is so repetitive that you risk losing interest before you've managed to afford the better gadgets. Of course, this being an iOS game, you can choose to spend real money to buy your way out, but that feels about as soulless as Southwest Airlines' seating policies.


VERDICT 4/10
DOESN'T FLY


Below: A few in-jokes can be found in the game for fans of Smith's movies, which may justify the price of entry for some.

THE BEST WORST MOVIE ADAPTATION

Manos: The Hands Of Fate

Below: Certain favourite scenes from the movie are re-created wholesale, which is very strange for those unfamiliar with the source material.

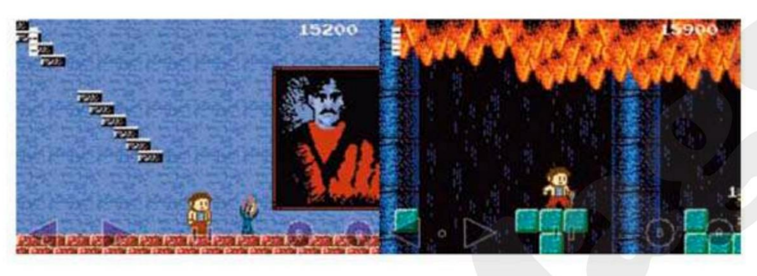
DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: FreakZone Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £1.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: iOS 4.2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A


BETTER THAN: A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET
WORSE THAN: POLE'S BIG ADVENTURE

Based on the 1966 horror movie so infamously bad that it was selected for ridicule on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, *Manos: The Hands Of Fate* adapts its ridiculous source material with surprising accuracy, given that it's presented in the form of a faux NES game. But perhaps that works to its advantage. The NES was flooded with cheap movie adaptations and often felt like they threw together several scenes and characters that had nothing to do with each other. The original *Manos* film is noted for exactly that quality, making this adaptation particularly well judged.





In play, *Hands Of Fate* offers level designs not entirely unlike those of the first *Castlevania*, while its core gameplay feels like *Mega Man*, right down to the way the hero is unable to crouch. Like both those games, getting to the end is tough, verging on impossible, but that only adds to the authentic retro charm and has nothing to do with the virtual joypad controls, which are surprisingly tight and responsive.

If anything does let *Manos: The Hands Of Fate* down, it's that it's not quite silly enough. Considering the inspiration, the designer could have gone mad with postmodern references and interactive jokes, but this is actually a surprisingly restrained game. As a straight-up NES-style platformer, however, you could do a lot worse. There are tons of retro-style games on iOS, but it's a rare title that captures the look and feel of its inspiration as authentically as *Manos* does. If you have a warped sense of affection for bargain bin games of the era, like Rare's *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, for example, *Manos* will be strangely comforting.

VERDICT 7/10
A LOVING HOMAGE TO THE UNLOVED

HOW SCI-FI ARE YOU?

Use the SciFiNow flowchart to find out…

START

- **HAVE YOU SEEN STAR WARS?**
  - STUPID QUESTION → DID HAN SHOOT FIRST?
  - NO → END
- **DID HAN SHOOT FIRST?**
  - YES. YES. YES → DO YOU WANT TO BELIEVE?
  - NAH. IT WAS GREEDO → IS MEMORABILIA FOR DESKS OR KIDS?
- **DO YOU WANT TO BELIEVE?**
  - YES I DO → WOULD YOU PASS A VOIGHT-KAMPFF TEST?
  - BELIEVE IN WHAT? → DO THESE MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU: 4,8,15,16, 23,42
- **WOULD YOU PASS A VOIGHT-KAMPFF TEST?**
  - NATURALLY → WHAT DOES OCP STAND FOR?
  - A WHAT-KAMPFF? → DO YOU KNOW WHAT EXACTLY THE TROUBLE WITH TRIBBLES IS?
- **IS MEMORABILIA FOR DESKS OR KIDS?**
  - KIDS → WOULD YOU PREFER AN IPAD OR ZIGGY?
  - DESKS → WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?
- **WOULD YOU PREFER AN IPAD OR ZIGGY?**
  - IPAD → NOWHERE NEAR GEEKY ENOUGH. BUT THERE IS HOPE
  - ZIGGY → WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?
- **DO THESE MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU: 4,8,15,16, 23,42**
  - LOTTERY PREDICTION? → WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?
  - OF COURSE → UNOBTAINIUM OR ADAMANTIUM?
- **DO YOU KNOW WHAT EXACTLY THE TROUBLE WITH TRIBBLES IS?**
  - THEY SMELL A BIT? → HOW DO YOU MAKE A SOYLENT GREEN?
  - SURE → DO YOU PLAY WITH YOUR MASHED POTATO?
- **WHAT DOES OCP STAND FOR?**
  - HAVEN'T A CLUE → DO YOU PLAY WITH YOUR MASHED POTATO?
  - OMNI CONSUMER PRODUCTS → HOW DO YOU SPELL 'RECALL'?
- **WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?**
  - FLUX CAPACITOR → UNOBTAINIUM OR ADAMANTIUM?
  - NOTHING → SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT
- **UNOBTAINIUM OR ADAMANTIUM?**
  - UNOBTAINIUM → WHAT DOES V STAND FOR?
  - ADAMANTIUM → WHO IS HAL JORDAN?
- **DO YOU PLAY WITH YOUR MASHED POTATO?**
  - NEVER → HOW DO YOU MAKE A SOYLENT GREEN?
  - YEP → WHERE IS BABYLON 4?
- **HOW DO YOU SPELL 'RECALL'?**
  - LIKE THAT → WHERE IS BABYLON 4?
  - NOT LIKE THAT → WHAT CLASS OF PLANET IS VULCAN?
- **WHAT DOES V STAND FOR?**
  - VIMTO → SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT
  - VISITORS, OR VENDETTA. WHICHEVER → THE FORCE IS WITH YOU. BUT YOU MUST TRAIN HARDER
- **WHO IS HAL JORDAN?**
  - NO IDEA → WHAT DOES V STAND FOR?
  - EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT… → FANCY A TRIP ON THE NOSTROMO?
- **HOW DO YOU MAKE A SOYLENT GREEN?**
  - WITH PEOPLE → WHERE IS BABYLON 4?
  - PAINT IT? → FANCY A TRIP ON THE NOSTROMO?
- **WHERE IS BABYLON 4?**
  - DUNNO → DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CULTURE IS?
  - LOST IN TIME → WHAT CLASS OF PLANET IS VULCAN?
- **FANCY A TRIP ON THE NOSTROMO?**
  - ARE YOU MENTAL? → WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN ON 27 AUGUST 1997?
  - ISN'T THAT A VAMPIRE? → SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT
- **WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN ON 27 AUGUST 1997?**
  - A PARTY? → THE FORCE IS WITH YOU. BUT YOU MUST TRAIN HARDER
  - JUDGMENT DAY → CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?
- **DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CULTURE IS?**
  - SUNDAY TIMES SUPPLEMENT? → WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN ON 27 AUGUST 1997?
  - YES → CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?
- **WHAT CLASS OF PLANET IS VULCAN?**
  - UPPER? → DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CULTURE IS?
  - M → CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?
- **CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?**
  - SURE CAN'T → IMPRESSIVE. YOUR SCI-FI KNOWLEDGE IS PRETTY AMAZING
  - SURE CAN → WE BOW DOWN TO YOU, MASTER OF ALL GEEKDOM

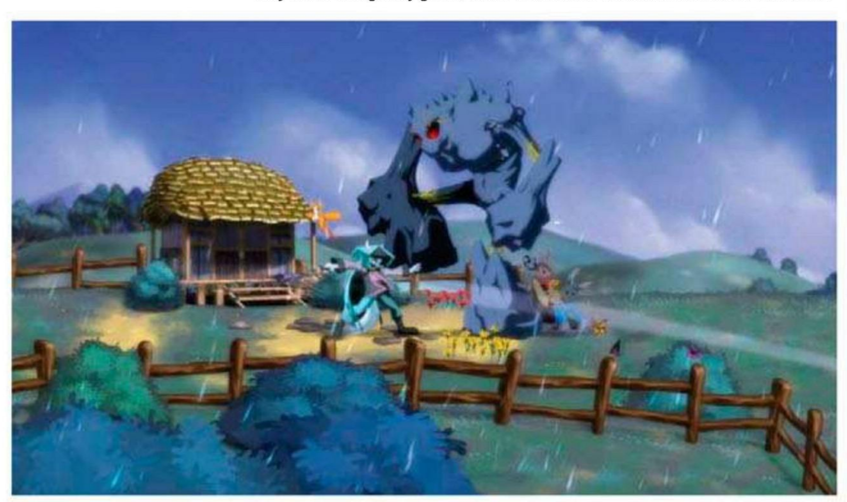
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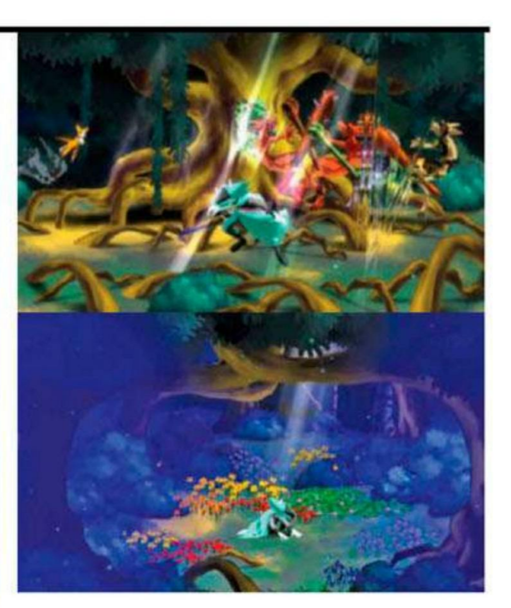
- NOWHERE NEAR GEEKY ENOUGH. BUT THERE IS HOPE
- SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT
- THE FORCE IS WITH YOU. BUT YOU MUST TRAIN HARDER
- IMPRESSIVE. YOUR SCI-FI KNOWLEDGE IS PRETTY AMAZING
- WE BOW DOWN TO YOU, MASTER OF ALL GEEKDOM

MORE SCI-FI THAN YOU THOUGHT?

JOIN OTHER LIKE-MINDED INDIVIDUALS EVERY MONTH AND READ SCIFINOW. **BECAUSE SCI-FI'S FOR EVERYONE**

Below: *Dust* doesn't scrimp on the variety when it comes to backdrops. You'll be moving your furry avatar through hilly glades, winter wonderlands and barren wastelands. Like Salford.





DUST, ANYONE? NO? SUMMER OF ARCADE GETS FEROCIOUSLY CUTE

Dust: An Elysian Tail

A cursory glance at *Dust: An Elysian Tail* will either fill you with dread or utter glee, depending on how you roll. We're in cutesy animal territory here, all bug eyes, fluffy faces and daft voices, so your tolerance of twee will likely be the deciding factor. Honestly, it can get a bit too much. Despite the odd funny line and an amusing little *Resident Evil 4* reference early on, there's really nothing here that will properly draw you in, either in terms of plot or characters. You play an amnesiac… thing called Dust, who wakes up in a fecund little glade, before being bothered by a talking sword and its furball companion. Cue an epic journey of self-discovery and hairballs that you'll barely be thinking about half an hour after playing.

What you will remember, though, is the gameplay. *Dust: An Elysian Tail* could basically be described as Metroidvania for furries. An oversimplified and dismissive statement maybe, but there's no denying the influence of those titles here. Open-ended stages filled with secrets and enemies to go up against are the order of the day, requiring backtracking and retracing of steps to progress further. It's nowhere near as tricky in its level design, but anyone who's wasted countless hours getting lost and swearing at Medusa heads in *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* will feel vaguely at home, notwithstanding the cheap cartoon feel of the whole thing. Add in some NPC-led side quests and there's a lot to do here.

Where it differentiates itself is with its combat. *An Elysian Tail*'s fighting system has more in common with 3D hack-and-slash extravaganzas like *Devil May Cry* and *Ninja Gaiden* – Dust even uses a move that bears a resemblance to Ryu Hayabusa's Izuna Drop – than the one-note combat in similar titles. It's far too easy, but it's undeniably a lot of fun, and it's more enjoyable beating seven shades of fluff out of things here than in, say, *Bloodrayne: Betrayal*.

What's most apparent is the level of attention and detail that's gone into the game. *Dust* was largely a one-man project, and it's a hell of a feat considering that. Creator Dean Dodrill clearly put everything into this and it shows. Regardless of whether or not you like the style, it's hard to deny how flat-out pretty and polished it all is, all beautifully hand-animated and running at a constant 60 frames per second. It's clearly been a labour of love for him, having been in development for years, and the fact that it's come out at all, let alone in a better, more enjoyable state than most studio releases, is testament to his achievements here. If you can stand the anthropomorphic animal hi-jinks, there's every reason to take *Dust* out for a walk.

DETAILS

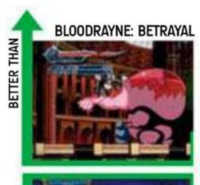
FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Humble Hearts
PRICE: 1,200 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

RISE AND GRIND: *Dust: An Elysian Tail* successfully marries 2D combo-based action and platforming with standard RPG tropes, like levelling, side quests and crafting. Which is nice.

BETTER THAN — BLOODRAYNE: BETRAYAL





WORSE THAN — CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT







VERDICT 7/10

NIGGLES ASIDE, POLISHED AND IMMENSELY PLAYABLE

YET ANOTHER GIANT SQUID IN A JRPG

Cthulhu Saves The World

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android, PC, 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Tinkerhouse Games
DEVELOPER: Zeboyd Games
PRICE: £1.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: iOS 4.3
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: CALL OF CTHULHU: THE WASTED LAND



WORSE THAN: DRAGON QUEST IX

If you missed *Cthulhu Saves The World* the first time around, this is a great opportunity to see what all the fuss is about. Ostensibly a pastiche of the 8-bit JRPG, it stands out from a host of homages by placing an unlikely hero at its centre: HP Lovecraft's Cthulhu. His powers diminished by a curse, he embarks on a quest of redemption, all the while sharing with the player that all he really cares about is returning to his evil ways.

Cthulhu's perspective works wonders within the hackneyed genre, allowing his sarcastic comments to poke fun at both the genre's strengths and shortcomings with affectionate humour. An optional director's commentary adds more amusement, albeit from a different perspective.

The developer's love for the genre shines throughout – Zeboyd also made *Final Fantasy* parody *Breath Of Death VII*, as well as the latest *Penny Arcade Adventures* – but you sometimes get the impression that the team stuck to the formula a little too slavishly. In its rush to pay tribute to the early *Dragon Quest* games, Zeboyd seems to have forgotten that random battles, confusing dungeons and static combat scenes can now put off even the most hardened players. It's worth pointing out, however, that *Cthulhu* does sport some great ideas in its battle system, specifically a combo mechanic that rewards players who save special attacks until the end of a battle, as well as a clever risk/reward element in which powerful attacks make enemies dangerously insane, drawing nicely upon the mythos.

If anything, the move to a portable diminishes the flaws, as grinding seems less painful when you're able to dip in and out, so the charms of *Cthulhu Saves The World* may just have found their home.

VERDICT 8/10
WITH NO DRAGON QUEST ON iOS, THIS WILL DO NICELY







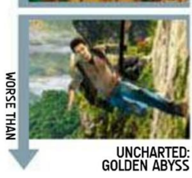
Above: Joypad controls transfer rather well to the touch screen, with up and down swipes controlling both movement and menu scrolls.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: The Blast Furnace
PRICE: £0.69
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: iOS 4.3
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: TEMPLE RUN

WORSE THAN: UNCHARTED: GOLDEN ABYSS



IT'S TEMPLE RUN, BUT WHIPPED INTO SHAPE

Pitfall!

Released to mark the 30th anniversary of the original Atari 2600 game, Pitfall! is a strange remake in that it honours the brilliant innovation of David Crane's creation with what is essentially a clone of a game that came out last year, Imangi's Temple Run.

You can see where Activision is coming from, though. A simple port or faithful remake of *Pitfall!* would have suffered from the same old control issues as plenty of other clumsy touch-screen remakes, so a *Temple Run* clone does make a lot of sense, despite the lack of originality. And it certainly helps that *Pitfall!* outdoes its inspiration in every way.

Drawing upon the resources and development expertise of the world's biggest publisher, *Pitfall!* outclasses *Temple Run* with more attractive visuals, a smoother frame rate, and a much broader range of animations that make you feel far more immersed in the game. That it's more fluid to play and easier on the eyes should not be underestimated. The luxurious feel keeps you hooked for longer and is essential for what is fundamentally a score attack game that requires players to repeatedly return to get the most out of it.

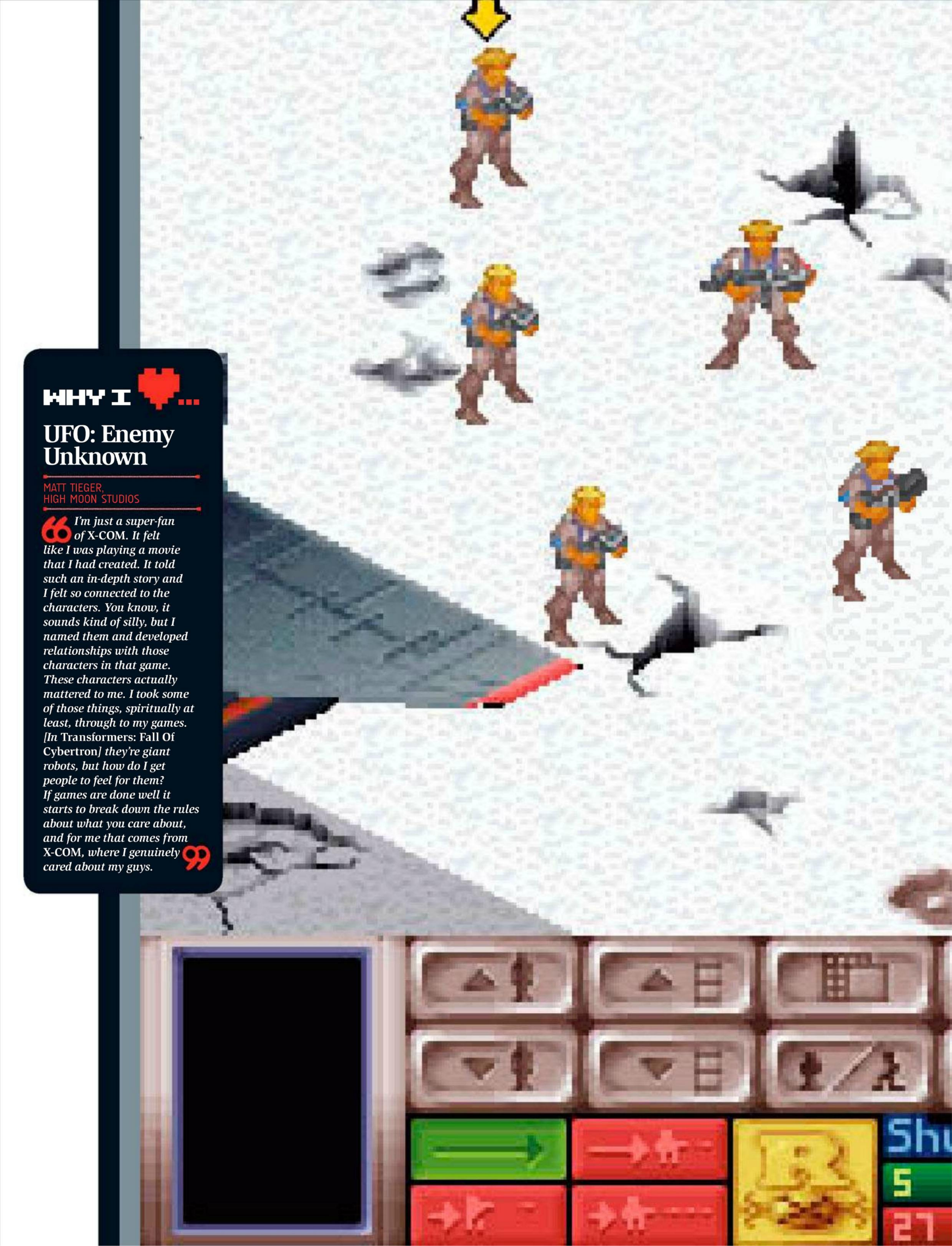
Throughout the game, *Pitfall!* keeps things fresh and interesting by regularly introducing new areas and obstacles to overcome, as well as random power-ups, like rideable animals or motorbikes that push the pace right up. There's also a wealth of in-app purchases – a touchy subject for some, but the in-app currency is realistically attainable without spending real money, while extras like costumes add value without damaging the game design.

As a celebration of one of Activision's most important early releases, *Pitfall!* may well disappoint retro buffs looking for a respectful remake, but iOS gamers will at least find it to be a fun and polished experience that easily takes the infinite runner crown for now.

Oriented horizontally, *Pitfall!* affords more thumb space than *Temple Run*'s vertical screen and is all the better for it.



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WHY I ❤...

UFO: Enemy Unknown

MATT TIEGER,
HIGH MOON STUDIOS

I'm just a super-fan of X-COM. *It felt like I was playing a movie that I had created. It told such an in-depth story and I felt so connected to the characters. You know, it sounds kind of silly, but I named them and developed relationships with those characters in that game. These characters actually mattered to me. I took some of those things, spiritually at least, through to my games. [In* Transformers: Fall Of Cybertron*] they're giant robots, but how do I get people to feel for them? If games are done well it starts to break down the rules about what you care about, and for me that comes from* X-COM, *where I genuinely cared about my guys.*



"It sounds kind of silly, but I named them and developed relationships with those characters in that game"

MATT TIEGER, HIGH MOON STUDIOS

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>.'THIS PROBABLY ISN'T A NORMAL EGG!'

NO.127 SEPTEMBER 2012

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THE TETЯIS AFFAIR

LONG-TERM READERS of **games™** may well remember a feature on the 25th anniversary of *The Legend Of Zelda* back in issue 115. In that article, various members of the games industry were asked to profess their love for their favourite game in the series but, much to our surprise, not every developer had kind words to say about Nintendo. One was *Defender* creator Eugene Jarvis, and the other was the man behind *Asteroids* and *Gauntlet*, Ed Logg, who said to us: "I am sorry, but I was never a fan of the series. This was due to my boycott of Nintendo after the *Tetris* affair, but that is another long story." Well, we couldn't leave it there, so we made contact with Logg again and made sure to get the full story on "the *Tetris* affair".

The events Logg refers to surround a version of *Tetris* that he helped create while working for Atari's NES division, Tengen. Released in May of 1989, it was pulled from the shelves just a month later, following a dispute with Nintendo, which claimed to have the exclusive console rights to Alexey Pajitnov's extraordinary puzzler. That's the short story. The long one, as Logg suggests, is a bit more complicated…

As is typical of this story, the beginnings of Tengen *Tetris* started in a bit of a mess. In 1984, Time Warner sold half of Atari to Commodore founder Jack Tramiel, whose new company, Atari Corporation, was allowed to use the Atari name for new home computers and console games. Warner, meanwhile, retained the arcade division and renamed it Atari Games. But what happened when Atari Games wanted to create console games? It couldn't use the Atari name any longer so created a new label called Tengen – a term used in the board game Go, from which Atari also took its name.

1984 was a time of transition for the American games business. It was a year after the collapse of the Atari 2600 market at the hands of oversaturation and a drop in quality but another year before Nintendo would reinvent the industry with the launch of the NES. Thankfully, Tengen was ahead of the curve, and its partnership with a big Japanese

In May 1989, Atari Games' Tengen division released the best version of Tetris on the NES. By June it had been removed from store shelves following a legal dispute with Nintendo. Now, the game's designer, Ed Logg, tells his side of the story…



publisher allowed it to see the change that was coming before many other American studios were able. Ed Logg, who had previously worked in Atari's arcade division, explains: "At the time, Namco had a majority ownership of Atari Games and they had rights to do games in Japan. So I was working on developing games for the Famicom. I spent most of my time reverse-engineering the chips and tools necessary for us to do games for this platform."

TENGEN MADE A number of games for the Japanese Famicom market, mostly arcade ports including *Pac-Man* and *After Burner*, but it also created a few original titles, notably the commercially popular *RBI Baseball* series. It also worked on a few ports of its own Atari arcade games, though the messy legal situation between the two Ataris made this somewhat problematic.

Logg was working on a conversion of his own arcade title, *Centipede*, which sadly never saw the light of day. "There was a legal issue of who owned the rights to *Centipede*," he explains. "It was not

Bullet Proof Henk

Henk Rogers, who secured Nintendo the console rights and developed the Famicom version under Bullet Proof Software, tells his side of the Tetris affair

Did you have any idea how complicated the *Tetris* licensing situation was when you went after it?

I had no idea. I looked at the chain of copyright notices and it seemed like a fairly long chain. It went from Electronorgtechnica to Andromeda, from Andromeda to Mirrorsoft, from Mirrosoft to Spectrum Holobyte and eventually from Spectrum Holobyte to me. So that's unusually long for a chain of copyright. And when I got into the negotiations, we'd already signed a letter of intent and Spectrum Holobyte got me what I call four different platforms, one being PC, one being arcade, one consoles, and I forget what the fourth one was. They came back and said, 'Sorry, but our sister company in the meanwhile has licensed the game to someone else.' I said, 'What are you talking about?' You don't sign a letter of intent with somebody and then say, 'Oh, I didn't have the rights that I thought I had when I was negotiating with you.' So, anyway, it turned out they had the PC rights, so they're the rights that I licensed from them. And then I went to Tengen to get the console rights because they thought they had them. But at the end of the day they didn't either.

Tengen went ahead and made its own version of *Tetris* for the NES anyway…

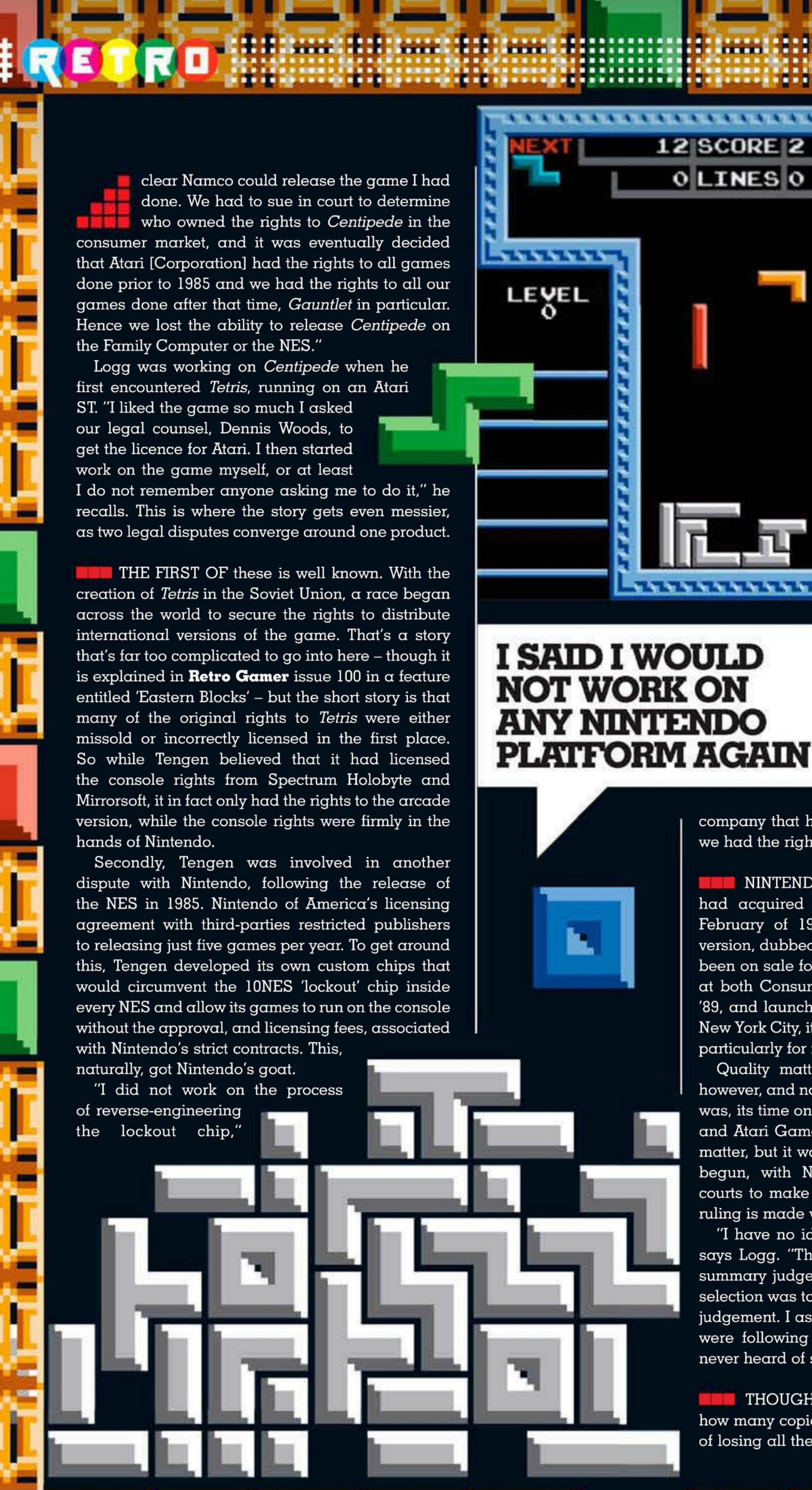
Yeah, Tengen and my company in Japan were racing to make *Tetris* by Christmas. I had my version of *Tetris* in Japan and they had their version in the US. In fact, they took some of my ideas. I changed *Tetris* back when I invented single, double, triple, Tetris and added that to the game. And on a slower level the game can get slow for a good player because the whole thing is moving slow. There was no such thing as soft drop, so if you were trying to score points, you had to wait until you got to the higher levels in order to score points. So I would give those players something to do like building up the little gap and making the game a little bit more difficult for themselves at that lower level.

So you saw a lot of similarities between Tengen's version and yours?

No, there were more differences than there were similarities. The deal in those days was that there was no guiding authority to tell you how to make this game. So all the licensees were making whatever they felt like as they interpreted the game. There was no one to submit it to who would say, 'Yeah, that's good,' or, 'This is no good'.

And is that what you do today in your role with The Tetris Company?

Absolutely. We standardise the interface and say, 'This button does this, that button does that.' We standardise it so that you can go from platform to platform and understand the game.



clear Namco could release the game I had done. We had to sue in court to determine who owned the rights to *Centipede* in the consumer market, and it was eventually decided that Atari [Corporation] had the rights to all games done prior to 1985 and we had the rights to all our games done after that time, *Gauntlet* in particular. Hence we lost the ability to release *Centipede* on the Family Computer or the NES."

Logg was working on *Centipede* when he first encountered *Tetris*, running on an Atari ST. "I liked the game so much I asked our legal counsel, Dennis Woods, to get the licence for Atari. I then started work on the game myself, or at least I do not remember anyone asking me to do it," he recalls. This is where the story gets even messier, as two legal disputes converge around one product.

THE FIRST OF these is well known. With the creation of *Tetris* in the Soviet Union, a race began across the world to secure the rights to distribute international versions of the game. That's a story that's far too complicated to go into here – though it is explained in **Retro Gamer** issue 100 in a feature entitled 'Eastern Blocks' – but the short story is that many of the original rights to *Tetris* were either missold or incorrectly licensed in the first place. So while Tengen believed that it had licensed the console rights from Spectrum Holobyte and Mirrorsoft, it in fact only had the rights to the arcade version, while the console rights were firmly in the hands of Nintendo.

Secondly, Tengen was involved in another dispute with Nintendo, following the release of the NES in 1985. Nintendo of America's licensing agreement with third-parties restricted publishers to releasing just five games per year. To get around this, Tengen developed its own custom chips that would circumvent the 10NES 'lockout' chip inside every NES and allow its games to run on the console without the approval, and licensing fees, associated with Nintendo's strict contracts. This, naturally, got Nintendo's goat.

"I did not work on the process of reverse-engineering the lockout chip," says Logg. "This was done secretly by three engineers, who would not discuss their work." Nor was he involved in the acquisition of the *Tetris* rights. "I did not know the details, but I was told we had the licence in the US, and the British company that had gotten the rights guaranteed us we had the rights."

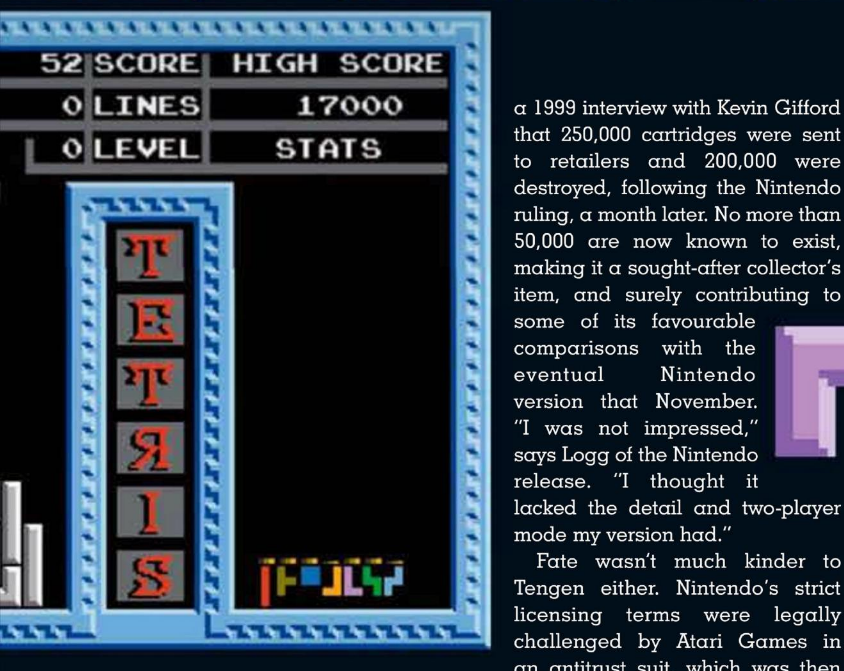
I SAID I WOULD NOT WORK ON ANY NINTENDO PLATFORM AGAIN

NINTENDO WOULD NOT announce that it had acquired the console rights to *Tetris* until February of 1989, by which time Tengen's NES version, dubbed *Tetris: The Soviet Mind Game*, had been on sale for a month. Shown to public acclaim at both Consumer Electronics Shows in 1988 and '89, and launched at a high-profile media event in New York City, it garnered a lot of positive feedback, particularly for its accomplished two-player mode.

Quality matters for nothing in legal disputes, however, and no matter how popular Tengen's *Tetris* was, its time on the shelves was cut short. Nintendo and Atari Games were due to go to court over the matter, but it was over and done with before it had begun, with Nintendo somehow convincing the courts to make a summary judgement, in which a ruling is made without ever going to trial.

"I have no idea [how it happened] to this day," says Logg. "The judge initially denied Nintendo's summary judgement request, but then, just as jury selection was to proceed, she granted the summary judgement. I asked some legal friends of mine who were following the case and they said they had never heard of such a situation occurring before."

THOUGH LOGG CANNOT now remember how many copies his *Tetris* sold – "Time has a way of losing all the details," he says – he did reveal in



a 1999 interview with Kevin Gifford that 250,000 cartridges were sent to retailers and 200,000 were destroyed, following the Nintendo ruling, a month later. No more than 50,000 are now known to exist, making it a sought-after collector's item, and surely contributing to some of its favourable comparisons with the eventual Nintendo version that November. "I was not impressed," says Logg of the Nintendo release. "I thought it lacked the detail and two-player mode my version had."

Fate wasn't much kinder to Tengen either. Nintendo's strict licensing terms were legally challenged by Atari Games in an antitrust suit, which was then countered by Nintendo in a copyright infringement suit over Tengen's reverse-engineering of the 10NES lockout chip. The legal battles went on indefinitely, and Logg later spoke about the period in the 1999 Kevin Gifford interview: "Our legal bills were $10 million a year, and that was more than we were making in profit in a year, even in the best of times. So we basically bled to death." Finally, in 1995, Time Warner absorbed Tengen back into itself and the studio came to an end.

For Logg, the events coloured his view of Nintendo for years to come. "The *Tetris* affair, as we like to call it, made me so angry I said I would not work on any Nintendo platform again," he says. "Of course, that changed more than ten years later when I worked on *Wayne Gretzky's 3D Hockey* for the N64 as well as several titles in the following years." Now, however, Logg has removed himself from console development altogether. "I am making games today, but I do not work on consoles," he tells us. "The reason is somewhat personal and some professional. I like simple games, so I prefer to work on games that I like to create and play. Since modern consoles require a large team and take a long time, my qualities will get diluted and lost on a large team. I really do not like to spend two years to work on a title anyway. In addition, one needs a licence or a franchise to make a great game today, which makes creating a new game very difficult."

Nevertheless, Logg's reputation lives on, not just because of his great arcade games like *Centipede* and *Gauntlet* but also because, even with only a month on sale, his short-lived version of *Tetris* managed to impress an awful lot of people. "I am not sure you heard the story," he begins, "but about five or six years ago the company I worked for went to Blue Planet Software [the current holder of global *Tetris* copyright and manager of The Tetris Company] to get the licence for *Tetris*, and while our CEO was negotiating the licence they mentioned the best version of *Tetris* and pointed out the Tengen version. I am sure our CEO was very pleased because she turned to them and said the same person that did that version was going to do their version."

Battle Of The Blocks

Which Tetris is really the best: Nintendo's or Tengen's? We pit them head to head

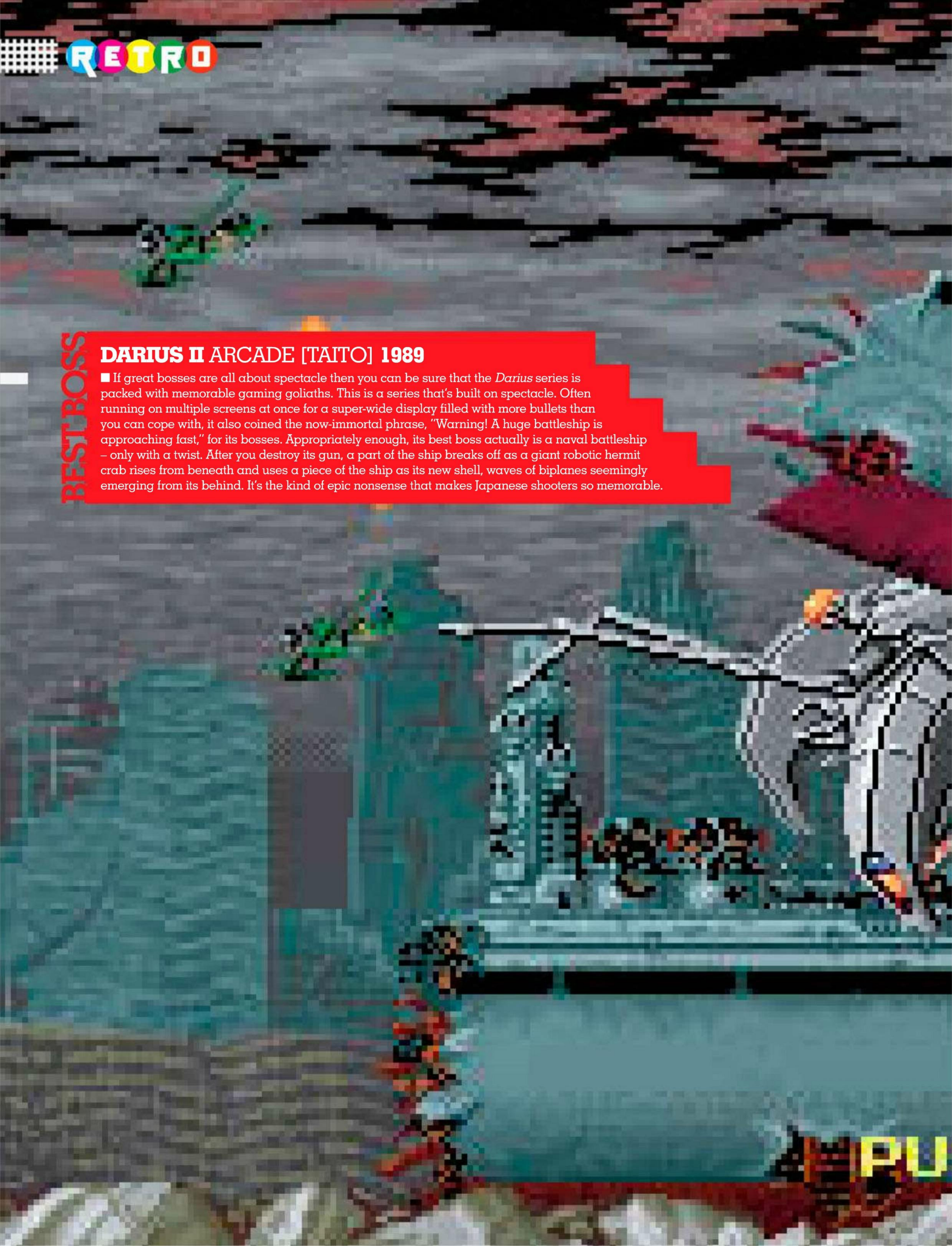
MUSIC
The most important factor in all *Tetris* games… sort of. Weirdly, neither has the classic *Korobeiniki* theme, even though it appears in both the Game Boy game and Bullet Proof's Famicom game. The Tengen version has the most traditional Russian tunes, two of which appear in the Famicom game, but Nintendo's has the more memorable music overall.

VISUALS
Though the Tengen version of the game looks fine enough, the monochrome blocks at the bottom of the well are a little dull compared to the coloured blocks of the Nintendo game, which change to a different palette every ten lines. Nintendo's animated endings, showing a rocket taking off next to St Basil's Cathedral, add a little flair too.

GAMEPLAY
Both games improve on the original design by changing the down button to a soft drop and putting rotations on the A and B buttons, and both incorporate Bullet Proof's idea of adding score multipliers to two, three and four-line combos. The Tengen version just nudges ahead of Nintendo's, however, due to the way it keeps the player informed of the points.

MODES
Nintendo's A-Type and B-Type modes, one the more familiar endless game, the other a challenge to attain as high a score as possible in just 25 lines, seem paltry in comparison to the range of modes offered by the Tengen game, which include the ability to play co-operative and versus variations of *Tetris* either against a second player or the CPU.

VERDICT
Though the Nintendo game has an undeniable level of polish in its presentation, its scant number of modes suggests it was developed very quickly, following Nintendo's acquisition of the licence. The Tengen version is just as good to play in single-player, while its other modes, particularly the inventive co-op, put it way ahead of Nintendo's effort.



BEST BOSS

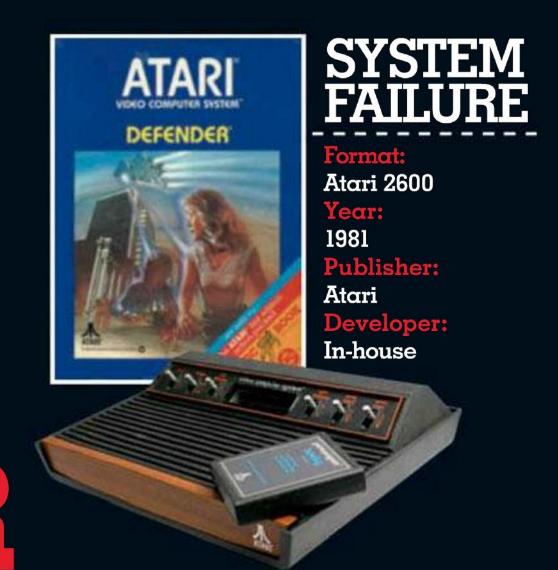
DARIUS II ARCADE [TAITO] **1989**

■ If great bosses are all about spectacle then you can be sure that the *Darius* series is packed with memorable gaming goliaths. This is a series that's built on spectacle. Often running on multiple screens at once for a super-wide display filled with more bullets than you can cope with, it also coined the now-immortal phrase, "Warning! A huge battleship is approaching fast," for its bosses. Appropriately enough, its best boss actually is a naval battleship – only with a twist. After you destroy its gun, a part of the ship breaks off as a giant robotic hermit crab rises from beneath and uses a piece of the ship as its new shell, waves of biplanes seemingly emerging from its behind. It's the kind of epic nonsense that makes Japanese shooters so memorable.


2UP
SH 2P BUTTON TO START

CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports, under the spotlight



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Atari 2600
Year: 1981
Publisher: Atari
Developer: In-house

DEFENDER

ORIGINAL RELEASE Board: Williams 6809 Rev.1 Hardware **Year:** 1980 **Publisher:** Williams Electronics **Developer:** In-house

EUGENE JARVIS doesn't make pushovers. The legendary game designer is responsible for some of the most challenging arcade games ever created. Previously designing pinball machines for Williams Electronics, *Defender* marked Jarvis's first ever videogame project for the company. Taking his knowledge and experience of creating pinball tables, he and *Defender* co-designer Larry DeMar created one of the most punishing shooters in arcade history by applying it to a new videogame.

As such, there are a number of parallels between *Defender* and pinball, which is probably the reason why the game is so challenging. In pinball, failure is inevitable. It's a game of survival and proving those survival skills on a high-score table. The same can also be said about *Defender*, which endlessly loops but with each roll over allows you to carry across your score. *Defender* was also incredibly challenging – famously so – and to succeed, players had to concentrate on every inch of the screen, paying close attention to a radar, enemies and astronauts that needed rescuing. *Defender*'s controls were also tactile and button heavy, similar to a pinball machine, with a two-way joystick used solely to control your ship's altitude and a selection of buttons used to fire weapons and change direction.

Released in 1980, *Defender* was a big success for Williams and so home ports were inevitable, and being the most successful home console of the day, the Atari 2600 was assured its own conversion. But while the console did a commendable job of capturing the look of the arcade game, despite the alien-looking, spiky landscape in the original being replaced with a blocky city, its gameplay didn't really measure up.

The most notable issue occurred whenever you fired your weapon. Launching an attack caused your ship to momentarily disappear from view, and if you fired your cannons fast enough it was possible to make it vanish completely. The other big issue with this port was the difficulty. With the speed of the game being much slower, with far fewer enemies on screen to shoot at, and the intricate controls of the arcade game remapped to a joystick with a single fire button, it was far less challenging. Thus, while the 2600 version might look like *Defender*, to the most ardent fans of the arcade game this disappointing conversion just played and felt a little alien.

HEAD TO HEAD

ARCADE



2600



THE BREAKDOWN

1 A big issue with this conversion is the fact that your ship does a disappearing act whenever it fires its gun. Naturally, it leaves you susceptible to attack from the enemy aliens. And you can't really lay blame on the hardware, as other 2600 games managed to juggle multiple sprites just fine.

2 The sound in this conversion is fairly disappointing. The ship's thrusters sound like heavy rain against a window, and the sprites look like abstract replicas of their arcade counterparts. To its credit, this port does feature a good selection of different enemy types, but they are too few in number to pose any real challenge.

3 This conversion also has a peculiar method for activating your smart bombs. To do so you have to fly to the bottom of the screen and behind the cityscape, where you are protected from attack. Kind of defeats the object of a smart bomb being a last ditch means to avoid death.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **ColecoVision** Year: **1983** Publisher: **Atari** Developer: **In-house**



■ With its super-sharp visuals, crisp sound effects, silky smooth scrolling and a button-heavy controller to play the game with, the ColecoVision had the most faithful port of *Defender*. There are plenty of excellent arcade conversions on the machine, and this is one of the best.

1992 1993 1994 1995

THE COMPLETE HI

YEAR IN 19

IF 1995 had seen Sony's PlayStation make a huge impact on the gaming scene, then 1996 was the year it began to dominate it. Despite strong showings from the 16-bit consoles and Sega's Saturn, and some monstrous PC hits like *Duke Nukem 3D*, *Quake*, *Diablo* and *Command & Conquer: Red Alert*, Sony's machine was proving to be unstoppable.

Capcom's *Resident Evil* delivered an in-depth, lengthy, adult gaming experience, coupled with a distinctive film-like quality that other games of the time simply couldn't compete with. Sure, it was a B-movie at best, but it made the FMV games of previous years seem utterly trite in comparison. *Tekken 2* made its home debut, and while the Saturn had an insanely good version of *Virtua Fighter* that had also been released, *Tekken 2* was just so much cooler. *Tomb Raider* made its first appearance on the Saturn in 1996, with the PlayStation version appearing a few weeks later, but again, everyone flocked to Sony's machine. In fact, *Tomb Raider* became such a success on the PlayStation that Sony locked it down for exclusivity over its next two releases. Key exclusivity with other franchises such as *Resident Evil* and *Tekken* also helped Sony dominate the generation.

Aside from Sony's clever marketing, the success of the PlayStation could also be attributed to the types of games that were appearing on it. Sega's rival machine was largely trading off the company's excellent reputation for arcade games. While it had some truly astonishing ports in the form of *Virtua Fighter 2*, *Virtua Cop*, *Baku Baku Animal* and *Sega Rally*, they lacked the perceived longevity that many PlayStation games had. And on the occasions when it did offer deeper gaming experiences, the same titles were available on Sony's machine.

Yes, it could be argued that there was nothing on the PlayStation that matched the effortless beauty of *NiGHTS Into Dreams*, or the stunning shooting found in *Panzer Dragoon Zwei*, but it didn't seem to matter. By the time the Saturn was discontinued in 1998, it had sold just over 10 million units; Sony's machine, by comparison, managed over 100 million.

As Sega and Sony were squabbling over 32-bit dominance, there were still plenty of exciting things happening for those who remained invested in the 16-bit generation of consoles. Sega's focus was clearly on the Saturn – the Mega Drive would be discontinued in 1997 – but there were nonetheless decent offerings, including

It was a great year for PC shooters. id Software made the wonderfully gothic *Quake*, while 3D Realms released the tongue-in-cheek *Duke Nukem 3D*.

Nintendo's Game Boy had a revision in 1996. The Game Boy Pocket's screen was changed to a true black and white display.

STORY OF GAMES

Vectorman 2, *Sonic 3D Blast*, *Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3* and *Toy Story*. Nintendo's SNES was faring even better, really hitting its stride thanks to the excellent *Super Mario RPG*, *Donkey Kong Country 3*, *Street Fighter Alpha 2*, *Terranigma* and *Tetris Attack*.

Nintendo wasn't done, however, and it was keen to maintain the vice-like grip it had on the 16-bit market as it began to make its own entry into the next-generation war. Despite being a fifth-generation console, Nintendo's N64 differed from the Saturn and PlayStation in a number of different ways. The most notable was in its name, Nintendo skipping the 32-bit processors that could be found in its rival's machines in favour of 64-bit technology. Then there was the medium it used. While Sega and Sony pursued the cheaper technology of CD-ROM, Nintendo doggedly stuck with cartridges, which were far harder to pirate.

It was a move that would ultimately bite Nintendo, as it lost much of the third-party support that had been so important to it in the 8- and 16-bit days. Square abandoned the system completely, favouring the versatility and space that CD-ROM offered for its *Final Fantasy* franchise, while Capcom, which had been a staunch supporter, was also largely absent, releasing a tiny number of titles towards the end of the machine's life. If the years would paint a bleak picture of Nintendo's machine – it sold 32 million units compared to the Super Nintendo's 49 million – it certainly couldn't be guessed at the machine's launch.

REVIEW 96

The N64 arrived in Japan with just two launch titles, but they were absolute belters. *Pilotwings 64* was a sublime follow-up to the superb SNES outing, while *Super Mario 64* not only redefined the *Mario* series, but also the 3D platformer itself, creating a template that many would mimic for years to come. Despite the lack of third-party support, the N64 still managed to have a strong start in its first year thanks to Nintendo's titles, which included *Mario Kart 64* and *Wave Race 64*. Rare would also become a dominant factor on the console, starting with *Killer Instinct Gold* in November and contributing to many of the system's best games in later years.

Despite a strong initial showing, the N64, like Sega's Saturn before it, would struggle to make a dent in the PlayStation's market share in the following years. That's not to say both systems didn't put up a fight, though…

Resident Evil was another title that was released on the Sega Saturn. And it was another whose sequel became a PlayStation exclusive.

The original *Tomb Raider* made its debut on the Sega Saturn. Sony quickly snapped it up, however, and later games were console exclusives.



Nintendo's 64-bit console packed plenty of punch. It also happened to launch with one of the greatest platformers ever made.

DEVELOPER of the YEAR
Shinji Mikami

Shinji Mikami started at Capcom working on Disney games like *Aladdin* and the greatly underrated *Goof Troop*. Before long, his drive and tenacity saw him secure his own project called *Resident Evil*, which became a huge success for Capcom. The publisher noted Mikami's talent and he was quickly elevated to producer for a number of games, including *Resident Evil 2*, before getting to head his own internal studio called Capcom Production Studio 4. He delivered the sensational *Resident Evil 4* and *God Hand*, before moving to Platinum Games and then Tango Gameworks, where he currently resides and is working on a new survival horror game.



EXTENDED PLAY: **1996**

POKÉMON RED & BLUE

Each month we select one of the most interesting or important games from our year in review…. This month, we look at the games that spawned one of gaming's most successful franchises

WHEN GAME FREAK unleashed *Pocket Monsters* in Japan in 1996, it was impossible for anyone to predict that it would turn into one of Nintendo's most important and successful franchises. Stemming from creator Satoshi Tajiri's love of collecting insects as a child, *Pokémon* riffed on this idea by having the player seek out 151 unique monsters. The result was a global success that has both helped Nintendo retain a firm grip on the handheld market and turned *Pokémon* into one of gaming's biggest franchises, with total sales of the series topping 175 million.

Pokémon's tagline is 'Gotta catch 'em all', and it's highly appropriate. Starting off with a choice of one of three distinct monsters, you must explore the huge game world and seek out the remaining 150 little critters – the final one, Mew, was only officially available from Nintendo. Most critters had to be hunted down in certain areas or environments, meaning there's a real satisfaction from discovering new Pokémon. Find or capture one and it gets added to your Pokédex, capturing the feeling of filling the sticker books we all used to enjoy when we were kids.

The real stroke of genius, however, comes from the fact that the 151 Pokémon are spread across two versions of the game, meaning players need to trade with each other in order to collect the entire set. Back in the day, link-up cables were traditionally used for simply competing against other players, so the concept of using it to transfer data and trade with friends was truly innovative.

THERE'S NO DENYING THE COMPULSIVE GRIP OF GAME FREAK'S ORIGINAL

And yet there's more to Game Freak's game than simply collecting things. It offers a robust and versatile battle system, with each Pokémon sharing a range of core traits. Pokémon can evolve into newer, more powerful forms, while each town has a resident Gym Leader who must be defeated. And let's not forget the sheer love that comes from nurturing your tiny pet as you level him up. Add in areas that can't be entered until a Pokémon's specific skill has been learnt and the crossover with the *Pokémon Stadium* games on the N64, and it becomes easy to see why Game Freak's game had, and continues to have, so much appeal.

The series' appeal may have diminished with a reluctance to move too far from its winning formula and an unhealthy number of new Pokémon to collect, but there's no denying the compulsive grip that Game Freak's groundbreaking original game still has.



■ Your starting Pokémon stays with you for life, so cherish him dearly.



■ Battles play an important role in *Pokémon*. Fortunately, the combat is varied.

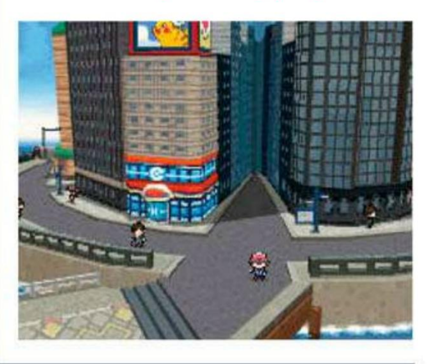




WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?



■ IN SHORT, a global phenomenon. The original *Red & Blue* were a huge success for Nintendo, selling over 8 million units. Needless to say, a whole host of clones followed in the wake of *Pokémon*'s success, with the most notable being the likes of *Monster Rancher*, *Dragon Warrior Monsters*, *Robopon* and many more. Few have managed to recapture the magic that Game Freak created, however, with most of them feeling like shallow imitators. The series itself has gone from strength to strength, making lead Pokémon Pikachu almost as recognisable as Mario, and enabling Nintendo to move the franchise into all sorts of directions, not all of them wholly successful. Cuddly toys, sticker books, films, comics… The success of *Pokémon* has been incredible, and with new releases like *Pokémon Black & White* continuing to dominate the charts, this juggernaut shows no sign of stopping.



ALSO RELEASED THIS YEAR…

SUPER MARIO 64



■ NINTENDO'S MAIN launch game for the N64 not only redefined *Mario*, but the platform genre in general. Brilliantly structured – each level is stuffed full of clever missions, ranging from collecting coins to racing penguins – and offering a truly sublime 3D camera, it remains a 3D masterpiece that few other franchises have ever bettered.

NIGHTS INTO DREAMS



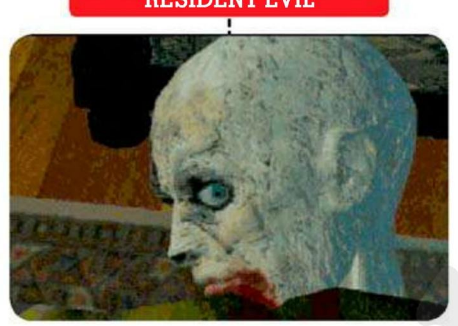
■ THE SENSE of freedom that Sonic Team's game gives you remains unrivalled. Playing as the eponymous NiGHTS, you'll glide and fly through some of the most imaginative levels to come out of the house that Sonic built. A masterful score attack game that was beautifully paired to the Saturn's analogue pad.

METAL SLUG



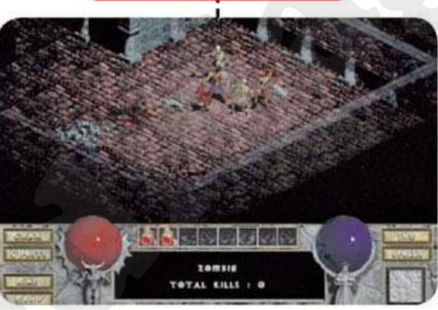
■ NAZCA'S *METAL Slug* is rightly hailed as one of the greatest run-and-gun games ever made. It's a deserved accolade, with the beautifully detailed sprites, masses of humour, excellently designed levels and epic boss fights all standing the test of time. A slick, well-paced shooter that's as funny as it is gory.

RESIDENT EVIL



■ CAPCOM'S GAME may not have been the first survival horror title, but it and its sequels would shape the genre for many long years. Filled with hilariously bad voice acting and genuinely terrifying shocks, it introduced many console gamers to the concept of mature games and was a linchpin in ensuring the PlayStation's success.

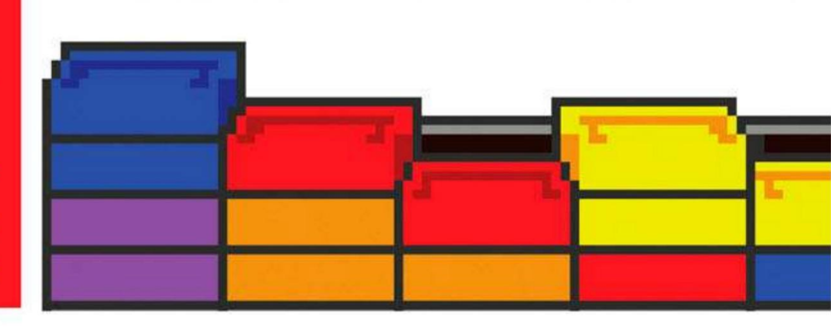
DIABLO



■ *DIABLO* WASN'T the first loot drop game to ever appear, but it instantly became one of the most important. Impossibly slick and filled with clever gameplay mechanics, it helped breathe the fresh new life into the stagnating PC market and was instrumental in turning Blizzard into one of the biggest developers in the industry.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures



DETAILS

FORMAT: Atari Lynx
YEAR: 1990
PUBLISHER: Atari
DEVELOPER: In-house
EXPECT TO PAY: £250+



EXHIBIT A: *Klax* is part of a tiny library of 16 Lynx games that were released for the machine in Japan.



EXHIBIT B: This version's cartridge differs from other Lynx games. On its underside it's missing the Atari logo and has a large bump of plastic.

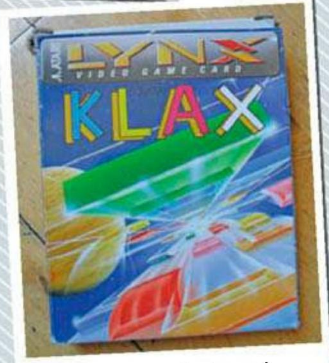


EXHIBIT C: The packaging and manual are also unique, but it's the unusual cartridge that interests collectors most.

KLAX – JAPANESE ATARI LYNX VERSION

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Why It's Rare

THE ATARI LYNX was released in 1990 in Japan, just a few months after the machine's American and European release. However, despite being the most powerful handheld console of its time, it wasn't big hit in the region.

This can be attributed to several factors. The unit and games were priced higher than they were in other parts of the world, and the console was also competing against Nintendo's Game Boy, which, despite its monochrome graphics, was around half the price and also supported by an impressive library of software. Because of this, only 16 games were ever released for the Lynx in Japan, and of this small library, *Klax* is by far the most unusual and interesting.

Not only does this version of *Klax* have different packaging and manual art to its Western counterpart, but there are some small differences found in the game itself. The cartridge is also particularly interesting, as it differs from traditional Lynx game cases: turn it over and the Atari insignia is missing and in its place is a prominent bulge of plastic. These reasons, plus the fact that copies of the game rarely pop up for sale nowadays, make it one of the most mysterious and sought-after Lynx games for collectors.

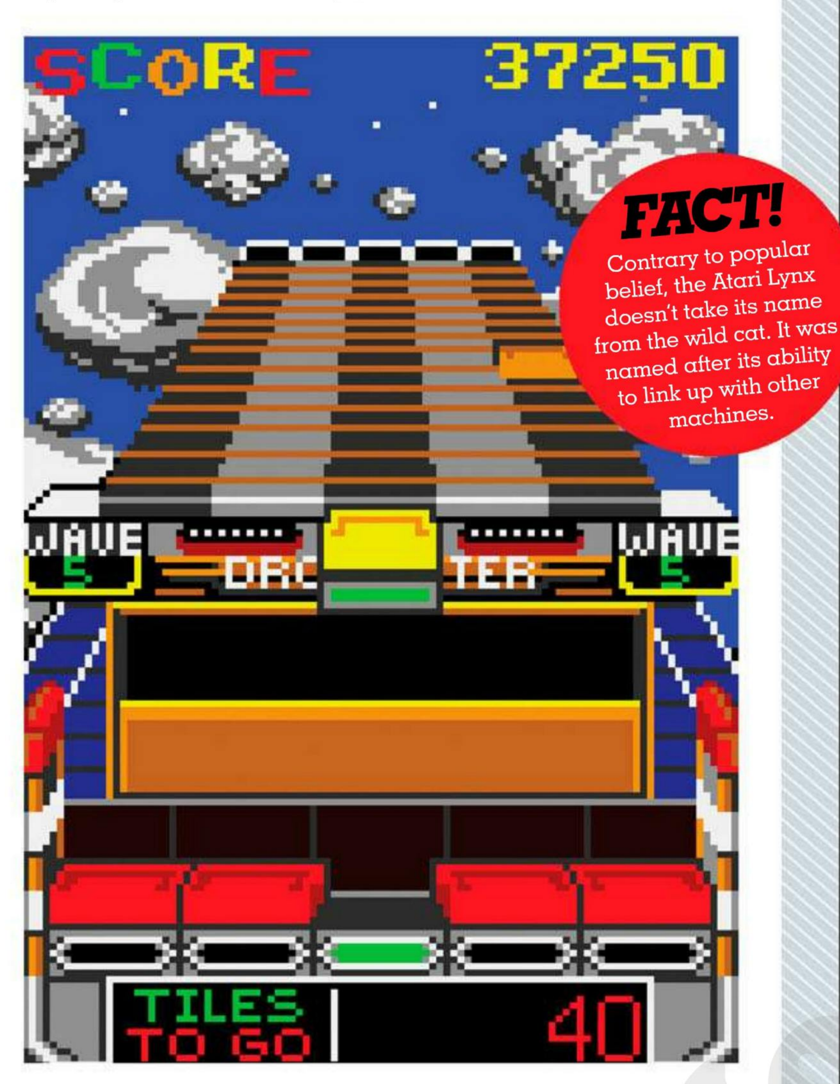


WORTH PLAYING?

LIKE ALL GREAT puzzle games, the concept behind *Klax* is wonderfully simple. Coloured tiles gradually come towards you via a conveyor belt and, using a flipper that positions and drops them into a 5x5 tile container, you must clear Klaxes: three or more chains of tiles of the same colour connected either horizontally, vertically or diagonally, similar to *Connect Four*. If you drop too many tiles rather than place them using the flipper, or manage to completely fill up the container, the game ends.

The Lynx hosts an impressive number of arcade conversions, especially of Atari's own coin-ops, and you can certainly include *Klax* in that camp. The Japanese version plays pretty much identically to the US and European versions, with the exception that it's missing some of the sexy-sounding digitised speech that plays during the game.

After debuting in arcades in 1989, *Klax* graced pretty much every machine and console on the market at the time. In fact, so popular was it that a version was even released for the monochrome Game Boy, despite the fact that colour is an integral part of the game. It used patterned tiles instead, in case you're wondering how it worked.



FACT!

Contrary to popular belief, the Atari Lynx doesn't take its name from the wild cat. It was named after its ability to link up with other machines.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Kieren Hawken**
Occupation: **Freelance Writer**

What is it about the Atari Lynx, and *Klax* in particular, that is attractive to you?
The Atari Lynx was the first machine I ever bought with my own money back in 1990. I saved up the money I made from my paper round for about six months and then my dad put a bit in to make up the difference. I have owned my Lynx ever since, and it is and always will be my favourite machine. Not just for nostalgic reasons but also because it's a fantastic console with very few bad games and a lot of excellent ones. *Klax* is a very impressive conversion of an already brilliant arcade game.

Where did you find the game?
I got it in a big job lot of Lynx stuff I won on eBay. I was certainly very surprised when I came across it, as it wasn't in the photo. I was even more surprised when I found out its value!

What condition was the game in and how much did you pay for it?
I seem to remember working out that it cost me less than £5 if I split up the value of the job lot it came in equally. It was mostly in excellent condition. There is a big crease down the left spine, though, sadly.

Do you actually play *Klax* and, if so, what do you think of it?
I still play it all the time, and in my opinion it is one of the Lynx's best games and one of the best puzzle games on any handheld.

Finally, would you ever consider selling the game or is it yours for life?
Definitely mine for life, not just because I am a collector myself but also because I'm a massive Atari fan. Several years ago, I was offered £500 for it from somebody in the US; I turned him down flat. Shortly afterwards, I unbelievably found a second one in another job lot, but this time it was just a loose game card. I sold that one through a forum to somebody in the US for £250!

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... JAMES BOND 007

Whether it's the classic charm of Sean Connery or the suave demeanour of Roger Moore, everyone has their favourite Bond, and yet when it comes to 007 videogames, the universal consensus is that GoldenEye 007 reigns supreme. But Rare's masterpiece aside, what about the other Bond games?

By now you'll probably have seen the opening ceremony for the London 2012 Olympic Games. Over its three hours and 50 minutes, one of the most memorable moments was the Union Jack parachute stunt with Daniel Craig and an actor dressed as Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The whole thing was pitched and sold by Danny Boyle as a celebration of English culture and heritage, and with the *Bond* licence celebrating its 50th filmic anniversary this year, it's clear that 007 will be reinventing himself for many years to come. But what about the 29 years of *James Bond* videogames?

Britain's top and entirely fictional spy has been a prominent fixture on the gaming landscape for nearly three decades, and although many of his games have been average at best, Bond has tried his hand at everything from FPSs and racing games to action-RPGs and point-and-click adventures. This year will also see the release of *007 Legends*, a new *Bond* game that'll span six of the classic films, starting with Moore's *Moonraker* and Lazenby's *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* and ending with Craig's upcoming *Skyfall*. Here we look at all the *Bond* games that have taken us to double-0 heaven and hell.



1983 JAMES BOND 007

DESPITE BEING released the same year as *Octopussy*, the first *James Bond* game had just four simple missions that were titled 'Diamonds Are Forever', 'The Spy Who Loved Me', 'Moonraker' and 'For Your Eyes Only'. It was published by Parker Bros for the Atari 2600 before making its way to the ColecoVision and C64, and although the company was more renowned for its board games, *James Bond 007*'s side-scrolling combat offered a degree of *Defender*-esque charm. You didn't control James Bond directly but instead moved his jumping car across the screen while shooting lasers. Not the most authentic 007 experience on the list, we have to admit, but it was the first game to replicate the signature theme tune by Monty Norman – even if it sounded like the death spasm of an Eighties synthesiser.



1985 A VIEW TO A KILL: THE COMPUTER GAME

WHEN ROGER Moore bowed out of the trademark tuxedo in 1985, he did so with not one but two games. The first was *A View To A Kill* by Domark Software – a publisher that would become synonymous with 007 throughout the Eighties and early Nineties. Appearing on the C64, Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and MSX, each version had three levels that played very differently. The Paris level has you driving a taxi around town as you try to catch a parachuting May Day, while the second level tasks you with running around San Francisco City Hall in search of Stacey Sutton. The final level is set towards the end of the film in a silicon mine rigged with explosives. You have to use a grapnel gun to cross large pitfalls while searching for the deactivation code.

ALL THE BONDS

SEAN CONNERY



■ The team at EA Redwood Shores captured Connery's likeness to a tee in *From Russia With Love* for the PlayStation 2 and Xbox.

GEORGE LAZENBY

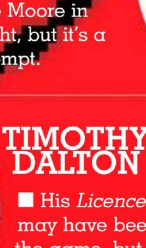
■ Lazenby is the only 007 whose likeness hasn't appeared in a videogame, though his film, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, forms a stage in this year's *007 Legends*, where Bond will be voiced by Daniel Craig.

ROGER MOORE



■ This title screen from the C64 version of *The Spy Who Loved Me* may not capture Moore in the best light, but it's a valiant attempt.

TIMOTHY DALTON



■ His *Licence To Kill* sprite may have been tiny in the game, but Dalton was given the full pixellated treatment for the loading

PIERCE BROSNAN



■ Even if they're a little flat by today's standards, Brosnan's angular Nintendo 64 polygons still retain a certain charm.

DANIEL CRAIG



■ As the 007 of the modern era, Daniel Craig looks the most authentic of the Bonds. He's even carrying a bigger gun.

1985 JAMES BOND 007: A VIEW TO A KILL

■■■ CONSIDERING THE *James Bond* legacy started off with Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale* novel all the way back in 1953, it makes sense that the *007* formula would translate well to a text adventure game, and so when Raymond Benson – the official author of the *Bond* novels from 1997 to 2003 – teamed up with Angelsoft in 1985, that's exactly what they created. *James Bond 007: A View To A Kill* was released for the Apple II, DOS and Mac platforms and featured a story that, while similar to the film, had its fair share of surprises. "I tried hard to keep the plot the same, although we had to make a couple of changes just so that players would be surprised," Benson describes. "I got to see a rough cut of the film early on. It didn't even have music!"

1985 007 CAR CHASE

■■■ MADE EXCLUSIVELY for the Commodore 64 by a man named Nicholas Coplin, not a lot is known about the development of this obscure *007* driving game. It plays in a similar style to *Spy Hunter* as the player can use machine guns to shoot enemy cars off the road as well as deploy a rear-facing smokescreen. You can also take down an attack helicopter worth 2,000 points with your surface-to-air missiles. As a *007* game, *Car Chase* does very little with the licence, save for the name itself. But if for some reason you feel the need to try it, you'll find it on the *C64 Classix* collection that was released for the PC back in 2005, along with over 500 other Commodore 64 games.



1986 JAMES BOND 007: GOLDFINGER

■■■ JUST LIKE *James Bond 007: A View To A Kill*, the second and final *James Bond* text adventure was penned by Raymond Benson in association with Angelsoft and Mindscape. The plot follows the man himself as he tries to stop Auric Goldfinger from taking control of the world's gold supply by setting off an atomic device in Fort Knox. It came out on the PC, Mac and Apple II, but while *A View To A Kill* deviated from the film's script in places, *James Bond 007: Goldfinger* toed the line much tighter. You even got to trade words with Pussy Galore and confront the formidable Oddjob with his bowler hat.



1987 JAMES BOND 007: THE LIVING DAYLIGHTS

■■■ WHILE MOST fans remember 1987 as the year that Dalton took to the big screen as the fourth Bond, it also marks the second tie-in from Domark. *The Living Daylights* was developed for eight systems by four developers, and as is often the case with multiformat games from the Eighties, some were better than others. The best was arguably the CPC version by Walking Circles Software, as it featured eight side-scrolling levels. An equipment selection screen also let you equip useful items like the crossbow, bazooka, ghetto blaster and missile pen between levels.



1988 JAMES BOND 007: LIVE AND LET DIE

■■■ FOLLOWING ON from *A View To A Kill* and *The Living Daylights*, Domark's third *Bond* game took a step back in terms of chronology by focusing on the first film to star Roger Moore. Legend has it that Domark saw Elite Systems working on a game called *Aquablast* and convinced the Lichfield developer to rebrand it to pay homage to the speedboat scene from *Live And Let Die*. The result was a just about playable game that looked a bit like *OutRun* with rivers, missiles and a rapidly depleting fuel gauge, and although the game was released on a range of platforms, including the Commodore 64 and Spectrum, the 16-bit Amiga and Atari ST versions by Keypunch stole the show.



1989 007: LICENCE TO KILL

■■■ DOMARK ENDED the decade on a high note with *007: Licence To Kill*. It was developed by a dream team called Quixel – whose former members include Visceral Games current COO Colin Boswell, and music composing legend David Whittaker – and was split into six different sections that faithfully restage the final chase scene. The first is a top-down shooter where you pilot a helicopter, the second slows the action down by making you walk on foot with a limited supply of ammunition, and the last puts you behind the wheel of a speeding tanker. There are eight different versions that can be played on everything from the Amiga to DOS, and while a NES version was developed by Tengen, Domark cancelled it after interest in the film subsided.



1990 JAMES BOND: THE SPY WHO LOVED ME

■■■ AFTER THE release of *Licence To Kill*, the *James Bond* licence fell into a long legal battle that would delay the next film by six years, and while Domark had to dip back into the Roger Moore era, the resulting game kept the vehicle focus of its last two efforts. Developed by The Kremlin, *James Bond: The Spy Who Loved Me* let the player take control of the iconic Lotus Esprit on both land and underwater as 007 tries to catch up to Karl Stromberg. The 16-bit versions of the game featured three additional levels that ranged from Agent Triple X covering Bond from a first-person perspective as he tries to set an explosive charge, to a puzzle game where you have to change the co-ordinates for some airborne missiles.



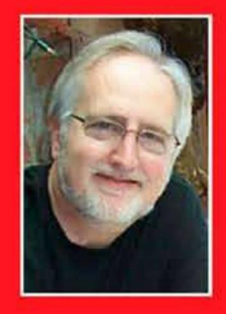
1990 JAMES BOND 007: THE STEALTH AFFAIR

■■■ HOW CAN you tell when a *Bond* game isn't really a *Bond* game? Well, one clue might be when James Bond starts working for the CIA rather than MI6. This is exactly what happens in *The Stealth Affair*, a point-and-click adventure game that was called *Operation Stealth* in Europe before being rebranded as a *James Bond* game in North America by US Gold. The plot focuses on a stolen F-19 stealth fighter plane that James – or John Glames in the UK version – must travel to South Africa to find, and although its status as a *Bond* game is questionable, it ranks as one of the best games on this list thanks to the writing and programming talents of Delphine Software's Paul Cuisset – the man responsible for *Flashback*.



1991 JAMES BOND JR

■■■ TO A seasoned gamer, the word 'scum' means disembodied octopus limbs and wannabe swashbucklers who can hold their breath for ten minutes, but in the world of *James Bond Jr* – a cartoon produced in 1991 – SCUM stands for Saboteurs and Criminals United in Mayhem. Two *James Bond Jr* games were published by THQ in 1991 – one by Eurocom for the NES and one by Gray Matter for the SNES. The 16-bit version featured side-scrolling shooter sections where you had to pilot a helicopter, boat or plane. Suffice to say it was fairly dull. In comparison, the 8-bit version did the NES justice with above-average graphics. It combined shooting, platforming and basic puzzles for compelling gameplay.



BEHIND THE SCENES: JAMES BOND 007: A VIEW TO A KILL

WE TALK TO RAYMOND BENSON ABOUT THE JAMES BOND TEXT ADVENTURES HE MADE IN THE EIGHTIES AND HIS CAREER IN GAMES

As we understand it, you wrote *The James Bond Bedside Companion* back in 1984. Can you describe how you went from writing a successful book to working with Mindscape and Angelsoft on *Stephen King's The Mist* and *James Bond 007: A View To A Kill* in 1985?
The *JBBC* was published in 1984. I actually spent three years writing it! At any rate, I was always into games. I was a fan and player of the paper and pencil *James Bond 007 Role-Playing Game* from Victory Games, and *Dungeons & Dragons* before that. I loved board games and Avalon Hill war strategy games. When computer games started appearing, I was naturally attracted to them. This was early on, when PCs were just coming into the home – my first was an Apple IIc. I had already started playing the Infocom text-adventure games – *Zork*, etc – and loved them.

Shortly after *The Bedside Companion* was published, my agent called up and said there was a software development company outside of Manhattan, where I was living, that had the rights to do a *James Bond* text adventure computer game, and did I know what that was? I told him I certainly did, and said I'd be interested. This company was Angelsoft, which was developing the games for release by Mindscape. I had an interview and got the job. We did *Stephen King's The Mist* first, and then *A View To A Kill*, followed by *Goldfinger*.

As a newcomer to the games industry at that point, how challenging was it writing these text adventures and how long did it take you to write the story?
I actually had to learn how to write the user code. I wasn't a programmer. The user code was done in a lot of 'IF' or 'ELSE' statements, with lots of brackets and such. You have to plan out the game on a flow chart with the various options a player can take, and fit the story in those parameters. If I remember correctly, it took about three months for each game.

The year after *A View To A Kill*, you wrote *James Bond 007: Goldfinger*. How do the two games compare and which one do you prefer?
Of the three games I did for Angelsoft, I prefer *Stephen King's The Mist*! That was a darned good game, a great story, it was suspenseful, and it worked the best as a game. The two *Bond* games were okay, but I think they were hampered by the text adventure format because *Bond* is inherently action-oriented. Action doesn't play well in text adventures. You type in a command, there's a second or two for the program to respond, then you type in another command – it's kind of slow and methodical. As for comparing the two *Bond* games, believe it or not I think *A View To A Kill* is the better game.

After working with Mindscape and Angelsoft, you lent your writing and designing talents to other games like *Ultima VII: The Black Gate* and *Dark Seed II*, before becoming the official author of the adult *James Bond* novels from 1997 to 2003. Would you be interested in working on another *James Bond* game in the future?
Sure, if they'd have me! I worked in the gaming industry for nearly ten years before I became a full-time novelist. However, I've kept a toe in the industry by writing novels based on videogames, such as two *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* books written as David Michaels; two *Metal Gear Solid* books; *Homefront*, co-written with John Milius; and *Hitman*. But if they came to me to work on a storyline for a *Bond* game, I'd be interested.



1993 JAMES BOND: THE DUEL

■■■ FOR ITS fifth and final *James Bond* title, Domark used an original plot that had 007 fighting against Professor Gravemar on a Caribbean island. *The Duel* was the first and only *James Bond* game to appear on a Sega console – in this case the Mega Drive, Master System and Game Gear – and with The Kremlin once again in charge of development, the result was a solid platforming shooter. Its only downside was the repetitive nature of its five missions. Rescue the girls, plant the bomb and then escape before it explodes. Rinse, lather and repeat. You also face off against classic villains like Jaws, Baron Samedi, May Day and Oddjob, courtesy of the mad Professor's cloning machine.

1997 GOLDENEYE 007

■■■ WILL THERE ever be a *Bond* game to top *GoldenEye* in terms of legacy? In all probability, no, because not only did Rare prove that a first-person shooter could thrive on the console market, but it developed the best film tie-in of all time. The fact that it came out almost two years after the film's release is also testament to how groundbreaking the game was. It had stealthy single-player missions with dynamic objectives; a hypnotic multiplayer function that's responsible for consuming millions of hours across the globe; and a secret pair of AR33 assault rifles on the Caverns level. The only casualty was the *GoldenEye 007* racing game that never saw the light of day on the Virtual Boy. Oh well. Probably for the best.



1998 JAMES BOND 007

■■■ RELEASED ALMOST a decade after the launch of the Game Boy and less than a year before its colour successor, *James Bond 007* by Saffire was one of the last Western releases for the system. It's the only action-RPG in the *James Bond* back catalogue and has a style of gameplay that's not too dissimilar to *Link's Awakening*. It doesn't star any of the Bonds in particular but instead focuses on an original story that involves a missing agent called 008, a weapons smuggling ring, and a Russian general who wants to nuke England. The game even has its own Bond girl in the form of Zhong Mae, who acts suspiciously like Wai Lin from *Tomorrow Never Dies*.





1999 TOMORROW NEVER DIES

■■■ WHEN THE revitalised *James Bond* videogame licence switched hands from Nintendo to EA, it was clear that the new publisher would have to craft something pretty spectacular to challenge the mighty *GoldenEye*. So it's strange that EA chose Black Ops Entertainment, a team that had just finished work on an underwater exploration game, as its studio of choice. The result was a painfully average third-person shooter that blindly followed the plot of the film while completely overlooking the flair and innovation that Rare had introduced in its effort. But perhaps *Tomorrow Never Dies'* most heinous crime was its complete lack of multiplayer. It was released towards the end of the PlayStation's life cycle, so there was no excuse for not including a split-screen mode.

THE ORIGINAL BOND

JOE GAUCHER TALKS TO GAMES™ ABOUT THE FIRST BOND GAME



***James Bond 007* for the Atari 2600 is the first *Bond* videogame. Can you describe how you came to work with Parker Bros on this game?**

After finishing work for Atari, I started a company called OnTime Software. Parker came to us with a series of titles based on our experience and past titles.

The game was also released for the Atari 5200, Atari 8-bit, Commodore 64 and ColecoVision. Did you work on all these versions and how do they compare to each other?

I did the 2600 version. We didn't do *007* for the other platforms, but we did do several other titles for multiple platforms.

The four levels are based on different *James Bond* films, while the gameplay focuses on shooting and jumping in 007's car. What inspired you to make a *James Bond* game in this way?

I wanted to do a parallax-scrolling game for both gameplay and aesthetical reasons.

How long did it take to finish making the game from start to finish?

Approximately six months, plus a couple more for testing and tweaking.

Aside from *James Bond 007*, what other games have you worked on?

I did several games for the 2600 and 800 but chose to only put an internal signature in those games. For some reason, my name got out on the *007* game. I actually did over ten games for those platforms, with *Gyruss* being my favourite.



2000 THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH

■■■ ALTHOUGH *PERFECT Dark* is the true successor to *GoldenEye*, that doesn't mean the other N64 *Bond* game isn't an excellent FPS in its own right – because it is. *The World Is Not Enough* was developed by Eurocom, the same studio that made the solid *James Bond Jr* game and is currently working on *007 Legends*. It uses a similar structure to Rare's classic by having the Agent, Special Agent and 00 Agent difficulty settings that determine the number of objectives you must complete. A similar game with fewer missions, static objectives and different weapons was also developed by Black Ops Entertainment for the PlayStation. This version didn't feature the N64's extensive multiplayer component but tried to make up for it with video clips taken from the film.



2000 007 RACING

■■■ ON PAPER, it must have read like a foolproof proposition. Let's make a driving game starring the current James Bond, Pierce Brosnan, where the player gets to drive all the classic 007 cars. Everything from *Goldfinger*'s Aston Martin DB5 and *The Spy Who Loved Me*'s Lotus Esprit S1 to *The World Is Not Enough*'s BMW Z8. Unfortunately, the team at Eutechnyx wasn't able to do the *Bond* licence justice. It tried to emulate the basic premise of *Spy Hunter* with driving missions that had you laying mines and shooting rockets, but the controls were clumsy and the graphical presentation wouldn't have looked out of place on a PlayStation launch title. *007 Racing*'s only saving grace is its functional yet entirely forgettable multiplayer mode.

AND THE REST…

2001 THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH



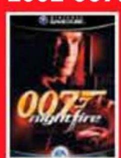
■ The Game Boy Color version of *The World Is Not Enough* was released a year late. It was a solid top-down shooter that featured eight missions and used an old-school password system to chronicle the player's progress.

2001 007: AGENT UNDER FIRE



■ *Agent Under Fire* kickstarted a whole new generation of *Bond* games that championed all-out FPS action. It was developed by EA Canada and EA Redwood Shores (now Visceral Games) using the *Quake III* engine.

2002 007: NIGHTFIRE



■ Eurocom proved its love for the licence by taking the reins for the third time with *007: Nightfire*, and just like *Agent Under Fire*, it featured an original plot in addition to vehicle sections. The original title of this game was actually *Phoenix Rising*.

2002 007 ICE RACER



■ A rarely remembered game that was developed by In-Fusio for the ExEn mobile gaming engine way back in 2002. It plays a bit like *Chase HQ* and is the only *Bond* game that's directly based on *Die Another Day*.

2004 007: EVERYTHING OR NOTHING



■ After two successful first-person shooters, EA decided to shake things up by going back to the third-person perspective. *Everything Or Nothing* focused on the gadgets and espionage, and even had a hand-to-hand combat system that let you use environmental objects.

2004 GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT



■ Despite its tantalising name, here the player took control of a dismissed MI6 agent with a cybernetic eye who'd been hired by Auric Goldfinger. How cunning.

2005 007: FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE



■ Before Activision claimed the *007* licence, EA Redwood Shores developed a game based on the Sixties classic. *From Russia With Love* was the first and only outing to use the likeness and voice of Sean Connery. It also had the jet pack from *Thunderball*.

2005 GOLDENEYE: SOURCE



■ Due to a multitude of licensing issues, an XBLA port of *GoldenEye*, developed by Rare, never made it onto the marketplace, but this didn't stop a talented modding team from faithfully rebuilding the multiplayer component in Valve's Source engine. Version 4.2 was released last month.

2010 GOLDENEYE 007



■ Re-imagining the N64 classic would have been a bold move for any studio bar Rare, but to Eurocom's credit, the Wii's *GoldenEye 007* was the good kind of nostalgia trip. The classic edition even came bundled with a golden Classic Controller Pro.

2010 JAMES BOND 007: BLOOD STONE



■ Throwing off the shackles of the movie tie-in once again, *James Bond 007: Blood Stone* is an original tale and the last game developed by Bizarre Creations – the studio behind *Project Gotham Racing* and *The Club*. It features a Russian industrialist and a Chinese terrorist as its two central villains.

2011 GOLDENEYE 007: RELOADED



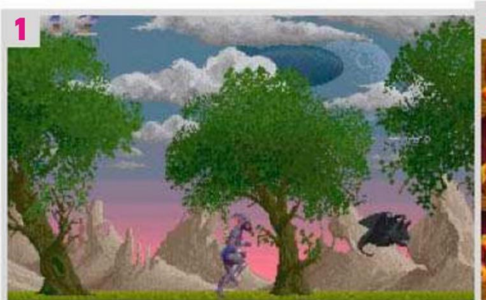
■ Essentially an HD remake of the Wii game with added MI6 Ops missions and Move support for the PlayStation 3, *Reloaded* is the most recent *Bond* game until *007 Legends* hits later in the year. Its online multiplayer was also expanded for up to 16 players.

ESSENTIALS

10 GAME STUDIOS WE MISS

■ Development studios, much like the rest of the world, haven't been able to escape the damaging repercussions of the recession in recent years. It's unfortunate that the industry has become so familiar with high-profile studio closures that it barely comes as a shock when another talented developer closes its door. Still, we can look back in fondness at some of the most inventive and passionate studios, and the fantastic games they gave us.

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Psygnosis
Origin: UK
Years: 1984-2012

1 When Sony shut down its Liverpool Studio last month, it struck a final nail into the coffin of the developer's previous guise, Psygnosis. As both a developer and publisher, Psygnosis was responsible for bringing some of the greatest games of all time into the world, including *Lemmings*, *Shadow Of The Beast* and *Destruction Derby*, and was instrumental in fostering British talent. Without its support of DMA Design, for example, *Grand Theft Auto* may never have existed. More than that, the PlayStation may not be where it is today. It was Psygnosis' low-priced dev kit, which Sony bought and distributed, that allowed so many other great studios to join the party.

Sensible Software
Origin: UK
Years: 1986-1999

2 There are lots of great British studios, but how many bring a sense of Britishness to their games? Sensible Software did just that with an immortal take on the country's favourite sport in the *Sensible Soccer* series, as well as a brilliantly satirical war game, in the form of *Cannon Fodder*, which trod a fine line between comedy, reverence and satisfying action. Of course, Sensible was known for quality elsewhere. With a catalogue of classics including *Wizball*, *Speedball 2* and the *Shoot-'Em-Up Construction Kit*, it's hard to comprehend how such a creative studio ever faded away.

Hudson
Origin: Japan
Years: 1973-2012

3 Best known for the *Bomberman* series – perhaps the greatest party game ever made – Hudson very nearly came to dominate the gaming world when it formed a close partnership with NEC to develop the PC Engine. Though it was popular for a while, Hudson's console dreams soon died, but it maintained a talent for fun, pure videogame design with more *Bomberman* titles, the *Bonk* series, *Bloody Roar* and *Star Soldier*. Though these properties still technically live on in new owner Konami, Hudson's playful spirit, embodied in its now-retired game master, Takahashi Meijin, is long gone.

Ocean
Origin: UK
Years: 1984-1998

4 Once upon a time, Ocean was the biggest publisher in the UK, with the sort of power associated with the likes of EA and Activision today. It wielded big movie licences and arcade conversions with ease, almost all of them higher quality than you'd expect, but it also invested in home-grown talent, publishing British masterpieces like *Head Over Heels* and *Wetrix*. With a catalogue sporting both quantity and quality, Ocean was the publisher it was okay to like. Oh, and it had the best loading theme on Commodore 64, hands down.

Clover Studio
Origin: Japan
Years: 2004-2007

5 Though many of the staff of Clover Studio now operate at Platinum Games, continuing their good work by focusing on quality, originality and typically Japanese action games, we still can't help but wonder what might have happened had they been allowed to stay at Capcom under the Clover label. That a massive publisher like Capcom could fund a studio focused on original, creative IP like *Viewtiful Joe*, *God Hand* and *Okami* is perhaps a dream that was too good to last. And the fact that Capcom closed the doors on the developer suggests we'll probably never see an in-house boutique studio again.



Working Designs
Origin: US
Years: 1986-2005

6 One of the most unusual studios in gaming history, Victor Ireland's team at Working Designs not only hand-picked the best Japanese RPGs for localisation into English, but also programmed in improvements and lavished each release with incredible special editions, packed with collectable materials. It was also known for its quirky sense of humour, which divided audiences, but nevertheless gave the company a personality. Ireland's work continues at Gaijinworks and MonkeyPaw Games, but its import PSone Classic releases are a far cry from the high point of Working Designs' wonderful output.

Love-de-Lic
Origin: Japan
Years: 1995-2000

7 Love-de-Lic is a studio few are familiar with, but you should take the time to look it up. It only made three games, but what games they were. *Moon: Remix RPG Adventure* was an RPG where you become trapped inside a generic *Dragon Quest*-alike; *UFO: A Day In The Life*, in which you observe a quirky apartment block to locate aliens; and *Lack Of Love*, a textless adventure where you evolve from a single-celled organism in order to save an alien world from a robotic bulldozer – all the sort of creative adventures sorely lacking today. Thankfully, its staff split off into other groups and made such cult hits as *Chibi-Robo!*, *Captain Rainbow*, *Contact* and *Little King's Story*.

Techno Soft
Origin: Japan
Years: 1980-2001

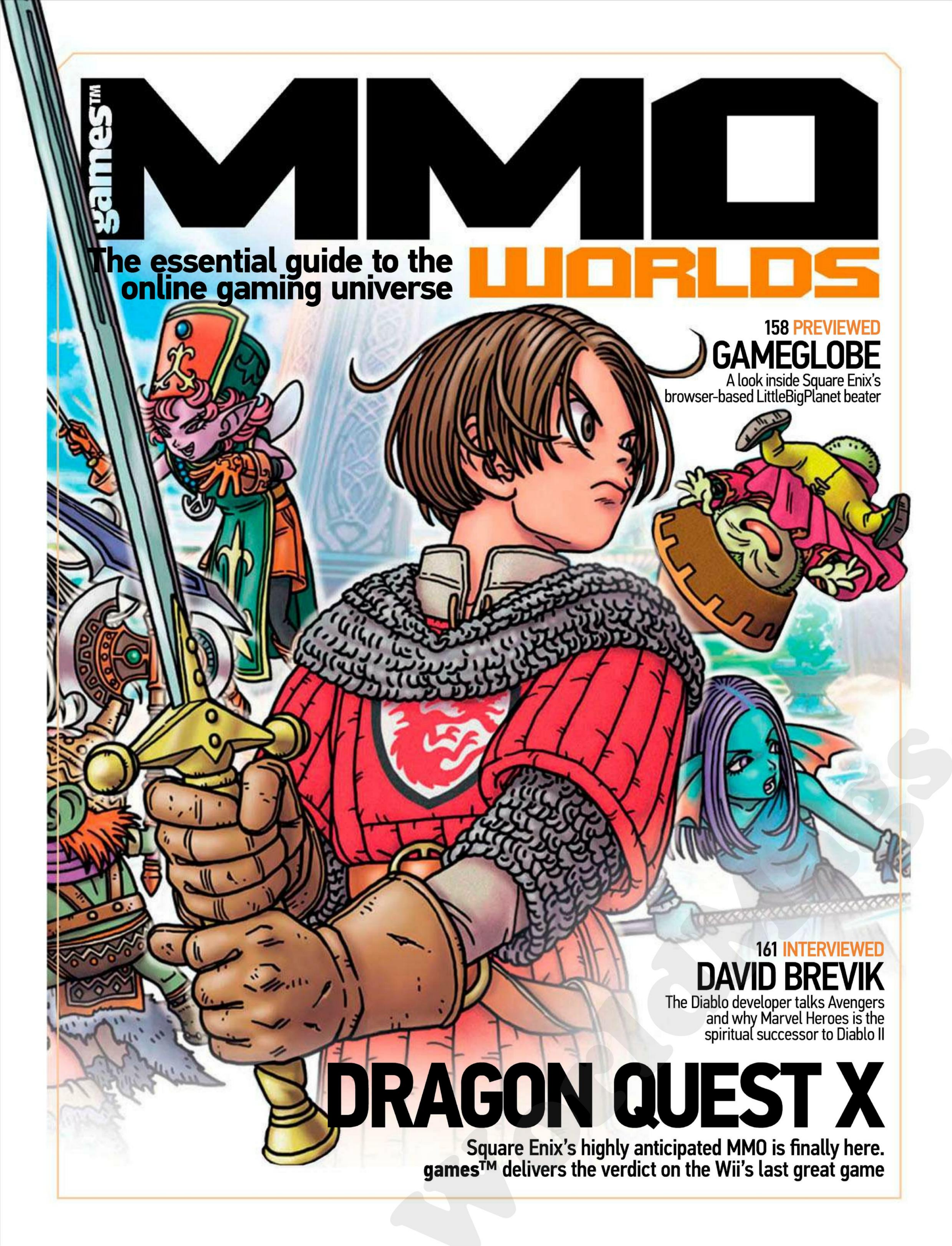
8 At the height of the 2D shoot-'em-up, Techno Soft was among the very best developers in the world, thanks largely to its excellent *Thunder Force* series, which combined exceptional visuals, exciting music and varied gameplay to excellent effect. Sadly, the studio rarely diversified its output – its similarly accomplished pinball games remained niche, while what may be the first RTS, *Herzog Zwei*, was too far ahead of its time – and the team failed to move with the times and died out. Sega attempted to revive Techno Soft's work with the PS2's *Thunder Force VI* in 2008, but it just wasn't the same.

Bullfrog
Origin: UK
Years: 1987-2004

9 The original Peter Molyneux developer, years before Lionhead or 22Cans, is where the great man made his reputation with a string of highly polished and inventive computer games like *Theme Park*, *Syndicate*, *Dungeon Keeper* and *Magic Carpet*. Like many of the best independent studios of the time, Bullfrog was swallowed up by EA, and though some of its IP was kept alive, the passion for new ideas and ambitious designs went with Molyneux to Lionhead.

Bizarre Creations
Origin: UK
Years: 1994-2011

10 Another great British developer whose talents were squandered by a company that bought it out and didn't know what to do with it. In *Metropolis Street Racer* and *Project Gotham Racing*, Bizarre perfected the hybrid of arcade racer and sim; in *Geometry Wars* it reinvented arcade games for the modern age, practically teaching the world how best to use online leaderboards in its sequel; and in *The Club* and *Blur* it continued to inject arcade values into mainstream genres. In its final years, Bizarre's talent was wasted on a rushed *James Bond* game, depriving the world of any more of the great ideas it surely still had up its sleeve.



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Hands-on with Dragon Quest X

REPORTING FROM THE FIRST TWO WEEKS IN DRAGON QUEST'S MMO DEBUT

The existence of *Dragon Quest X* is a topic that could generate months of discussion. Should it have been called *Dragon Quest Online* instead of receiving the official 'X' designation? Is a subscription-based MMO – on the Wii, no less – for a franchise that is popular primarily in Japan a wise move when nearly every MMO except *WOW* is free-to-play? Regardless of your opinions on these matters, when you think of all the things that could have gone wrong with *DQX*, the early August Japanese launch went surprisingly smoothly, with few hiccups in the process of installing the game to the required 16GB USB stick, or setting up the mandatory Square Enix Members account, in which you are thankfully spared creating a dreaded 'Crysta' account, as you would with *FFXI* and *FFXIV*. Squeenix also made sure to have more than enough servers at the ready, deftly avoiding the issues that plagued Blizzard's *Diablo III* launch.

But once past the installation process, which takes around an hour, the entire game – offline and online portions, both – boots up cleanly from the USB stick; you can remove *DQX*'s two discs, stick them in the box and forget about them. You're then tasked with creating not one, but two characters – siblings, to be precise. You're restricted to human character types at this point, starting with your main character (male or female), and then your sibling. After you've completed the process, you're thrust into *DQX*'s offline mode, essentially the game's tutorial, free of the pressures of an active online community. After fulfilling the initial quests, an in-game event occurs that separates the siblings you've designed, sending one into the online world, while the other remains behind in an offline portion of the game.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: **Wii, Wii U**
PUBLISHER: **Square Enix**
DEVELOPER: **In-house**
ORIGIN: **Japan**



IT'S AT THIS point where you must either enter your existing Square Enix Members info, or set up a new account, which can be done either in-game or online via the SEM website. There's no need to set up automatic payments, although it is an option, since you can pay with the same Nintendo Points you use to download WiiWare or Virtual Console games. Once past this process, you then redesign your main character in the style of one of *DQX*'s five tribes: Pukiripo, Dwarf, Ogre, Elf or Weddie. Depending on the tribe you select, you'll start in a different part of the world, each with its own storyline ranging from serious to humorous, and select a job class: warrior, thief, priest, mage, minstrel or martial artist.

Hopping online is a simple matter of selecting a character (each account can hold up to three) and a server. Characters are not tied to servers as in *FFXI*, and online realms can instead be chosen freely, similar to how *Phantasy Star Online* worked.
In fact, it should come as no surprise to discover that a large part of the *Dragon Quest X* experience is remarkably similar

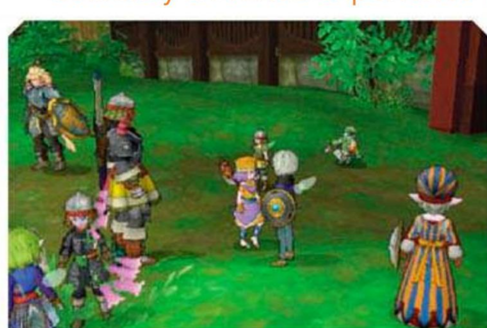


Each tribe has its own storyline and therefore first boss that must be conquered to advance the plot.

Whether you're looking for active players to team up with or you stick with AI partners, a full party is always a click away.

"To say that Dragon Quest X is a reskinning of FFXI wouldn't be an overstatement, but it's definitely a refined experience"









Parties in *DQX* are restricted to four players, as opposed to *FFXI*'s six-player groups.

to *Final Fantasy XI*. In what simply has to be modified *FFXI* tech – unsurprising since the Wii hardware is on par with the PS2 specs – *DQX* features similarly sized and designed environments, an almost identical camera logic, familiar character animations (the Pukiripo are doppelgangers for *XI*'s Tarutaru), and battle speed. The difference in battle is you play a more active role, as opposed to *XI*'s semi-automatic combat. *DQX* features overly familiar game design similarities, too, such as the same staggered armour upgrades at levels 7, 14, 21 and beyond, along with auction house functions, quest types and fame rankings.

To say that *DQX* is a reskinning of *FFXI* in '*DraQue*' clothing wouldn't be an overstatement, but it's definitely a refined experience, featuring fewer frustrating deaths, plenty of mob respawns, a much lower penalty for falling in battle, and faster character progression. Perhaps the best perk in *DQX* not found in *FFXI* is the ability to hire NPC allies to fill out your team if you prefer to play solo. These AI buddies are actually the characters of real players that can be hired out, similar to *Dragon's Dogma*, and in turn receive experience and gold for their services. You can rent out your own character when you're offline, as well, reaping the same benefits. It's difficult to assess whether *DQX* will resonate globally, whenever the eventual English version surfaces – we hear it will be published in some areas by Nintendo itself – but with a solid foundation and a more forgiving learning curve, *Dragon Quest X* could have a long life ahead of it.

GREAT SUCCESS

While the *Borat*-esque title of the app, 'Dragon Quest X Convenient Tool For Adventurers On The Go: Vol.1', is definitely over the top, Square Enix has created a useful *DQX*-specific utility for 3DS, downloadable with a single-use code that comes with every copy of the game. Similarly to Blizzard's *World Of Warcraft* Mobile Armory app, it allows players to examine their characters, send mail in-game to *DQX* friends, browse the bazaar, check how often their character is being employed by others, and even receive bonus perks if they StreetPass with another 3DS-equipped *DQX* player. It's a cool interactive tool that adds a lot of fun for people on the go who want to stay connected to their *Dragon Quest X* lifestyle.

MMO UPDATES

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

OLD REPUBLIC: TOLD YA SO!



Remember when we said that the troubled *Star Wars: The Old Republic* would go free-to-play? Turns out we were right. Sort of. By the time you read this, BioWare's game will have switched to a free-to-play model for anyone under level 50. After that, there's a monthly subscription of £8.99.

WIZARDRY ONLINE COMES WEST



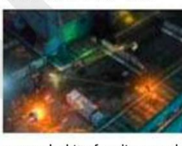
Sony has picked up Japan's *Wizardry Online* for Western release. Ditching the long-running series' first-person perspective for the first time, *Wizardry Online* is a more action-oriented game that's packed with traps and the terrifying threat of permadeath. It's kind of like *Dark Souls* for the MMO crowd.

DC UNIVERSE ONLINE EXPANDS



New *DC Universe Online* expansion *Hand Of Fate* is out now and expands the PC/PS3 superhero MMO with a series of new episodic missions and side quests, new characters, and a utility belt that allows players to up their number of equipped trinkets from one to four, giving added flexibility when doing their superhero thing.

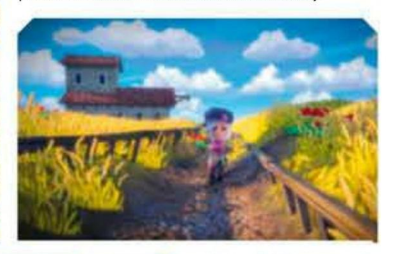
SHADOWRUN ONLINE IS GO



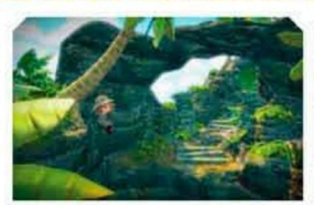
Mentioned briefly last issue, *Shadowrun Online* exceeded its funding goal on Kickstarter in August and will now go into full production for multiple formats. It's an unusual online game in that it's a turn-based SRPG. For more details, see the official Shadowrun site at **shadowrun.com** or check its Kickstarter page.



■ To date, Hapti.co has released three themed packs, with a fourth to be released imminently.



■ It's without a doubt one of the most visually arresting browser-based games on the market.







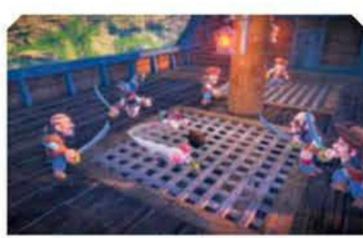
■ The game will utilise microtransactions for revenue. However, Hapti.co has been running it completely free in its beta period to establish what to offer at a premium.

Gameglobe

A LOOK AT SQUARE ENIX'S BROWSER-BASED WEB GAME

Okay, let's get this out of the way immediately: *Gameglobe* isn't strictly an MMO. It's a browser-based online game wholly reliant on its community, but it has far more in common with Sony's flagship platformer *LittleBigPlanet* or Maxis' *SimCity* than the traditional preconception of what your average free-to-play browser-based game should be.

Developed by the Square Enix-owned Danish studio Hapti.co, *Gameglobe* is fundamentally a creation game, but backs up its construction tools with a depth of gameplay far beyond what is expected of it.



INFORMATION

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **Square Enix**
DEVELOPER: **Hapti.co**
ORIGIN: **Denmark**
RELEASE: **2013**
PRICE: **Free**

"First of all, it's flattering that we're being compared to *LittleBigPlanet* because it's an amazing game and it has been a big inspiration for us," beams game director Rune Vendler, before detailing how the two games differ. "We're trying to do this on the web, which means we can reach a massive amount of people and also means that people can easily share their stuff with other people. They're not in some cordoned-off garden on PlayStation; they can share with anyone they want in a very easy way. Secondly, we're trying to do a very different genre of game. This is a third-person action-adventure and you have free control of the camera. You've got mechanics that are about combat as well as platforming."

/// ***Gameglobe* encourages** players to create their own stories, utilising the provided tools to build unique 3D experiences in a vibrant world, brimming with prospects. In under an hour spent fiddling with the level editor, it's possible to assemble a small stage to explore, replete with a tiny windmill sitting riverside and a rope bridge, both guarded by formidable pirates.

It's rudimentary, to say the least, but the potential of the game is keenly visible. Similar to *Minecraft*, levers and switches can be placed around the environment to interact with objects, which can help design simplistic puzzles for levels. Unlike Mojang's game, however, the drag-and-drop interface is much more accessible, and players can even influence the tone of the environment by tweaking sliders in the World Menu.

"The third-person perspective allows you to make almost any game," adds Vendler. "It's also very easy for us to update the game because we're not on a disc, which means we'll have a very tight relationship with our community that we can react to."

Hapti.co has been successfully nurturing its budding community to date, using feedback on the current Jungle, Pirate and Colonial prop packs and looking to the future as it prepares to launch the newest selection of items in the Mercenary pack. You can already get a good idea of what to expect when the game finishes its open beta by taking a glance at YouTube, where players have been demonstrating their creations. If the community continues to showcase such flair and imagination, Square Enix's curious project might set the benchmark for browser-based gaming in the future.

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MMO WORLDS GUILD CHAT

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



David Brevik

President and COO of Gazillion Entertainment

The renowned developer of Diablo and its first sequel has returned to action-RPGs with Gazillion Entertainment's free-to-play MMO, Marvel Heroes. Brevik discusses Marvel's input, what DC Universe Online did wrong, and how this is the spiritual successor to Diablo II



Apart from being an MMO, what else differentiates *Marvel Heroes* from similar titles, such as *Marvel Ultimate Alliance*?
Well, being an MMO is quite a difference in and of itself. But it's more than that. Underneath we have a very deep, rich RPG. It's a true RPG with lots of stats, levels, random items and all these kind of things that in my past with action-RPGs have been the foundations by which I create games.

How closely has Gazillion collaborated with Marvel?
We've worked quite closely with them. We have access to the entire IP. This isn't just an *X-Men* game or an *Avengers* game – we have access to every single character. We have access to many hundreds of costumes and storylines; the whole book is open to us. They introduced us to Brian Michael Bendis, who is writing our story – he's the Marvel superscribe and has been fundamental to their writing crew – and artists who they work closely with currently and in the past, as well as voice actors. They're highly involved and we go to them daily to get feedback on dialogue, art and all sorts of things. It's a real, genuine Marvel product.

> Marvel Heroes is very, very similar to what we were thinking about for Diablo III

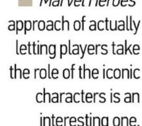
Have you taken a traditional approach to *Marvel Heroes*' class system?
There are a bunch of powers they use that go together nicely in multiplayer. It isn't the traditional MMO classes of tanking, DPS and healing. Healing doesn't really make much sense in the Marvel Universe – you don't have Captain Medic running around, patching everybody up. So we've gone away from those roles and gone with something that feels a lot more Marvel-like. I don't want to say anything, but I'm just going to say 'fastball special', and people who understand Marvel will get that one.

Did you feel there was any area in particular that *DC Universe Online* missed the mark on?
We tried to go a different route than the traditional method of making your own superhero. When you create a character in *DC Universe*, for instance, you make some guy and it'll be an Iron Man proxy called Steel Man, or Captain Sparklepants. Nobody knows these characters, nobody understands their powers, and they have no meaning to you. It just didn't feel like that was an experience as fun as actually playing as the heroes I know and love.

What are your intentions with PvP in the game? Surely supervillains are a good fit?
That's a really good idea. Sounds like fun! [laughs]

Gazillion has stated that *Marvel Heroes* is a spiritual successor to *Diablo II*. Do you stand by that?
We've got a lot of team members here that worked on *Diablo II*, including me, and so in a lot of ways it is. This is originally the design that we wanted to make [from a gameplay standpoint], and is very, very similar to what we were thinking about for *Diablo III*. I've taken what I learned in *Diablo* and made in *Diablo II*, and some of the stuff that we wanted to do in *Diablo II* and that we were going to do in *Diablo III*, and put it in *Marvel Heroes*. So in a lot of ways, this is the spiritual successor to *Diablo II*.

Can you give an example of a feature intended for *Diablo III* that's present in *Marvel Heroes*?
When we were making *Diablo II*, we wanted to make this thing called Battle.net Town, where instead of coming into a chat room you came into a town. You never really were in a chat room; you were in the world at all times. So you were running around, there were other people, and you were interacting, trading and chatting. It was basically a graphic chat room. That was the foundation of where we were going to push *Diablo III* into an action-RPG MMO. What I'm doing here in *Marvel Heroes* is actually going to come out and take that next step in action-RPGs.





Marvel Heroes' approach of actually letting players take the role of the iconic characters is an interesting one.



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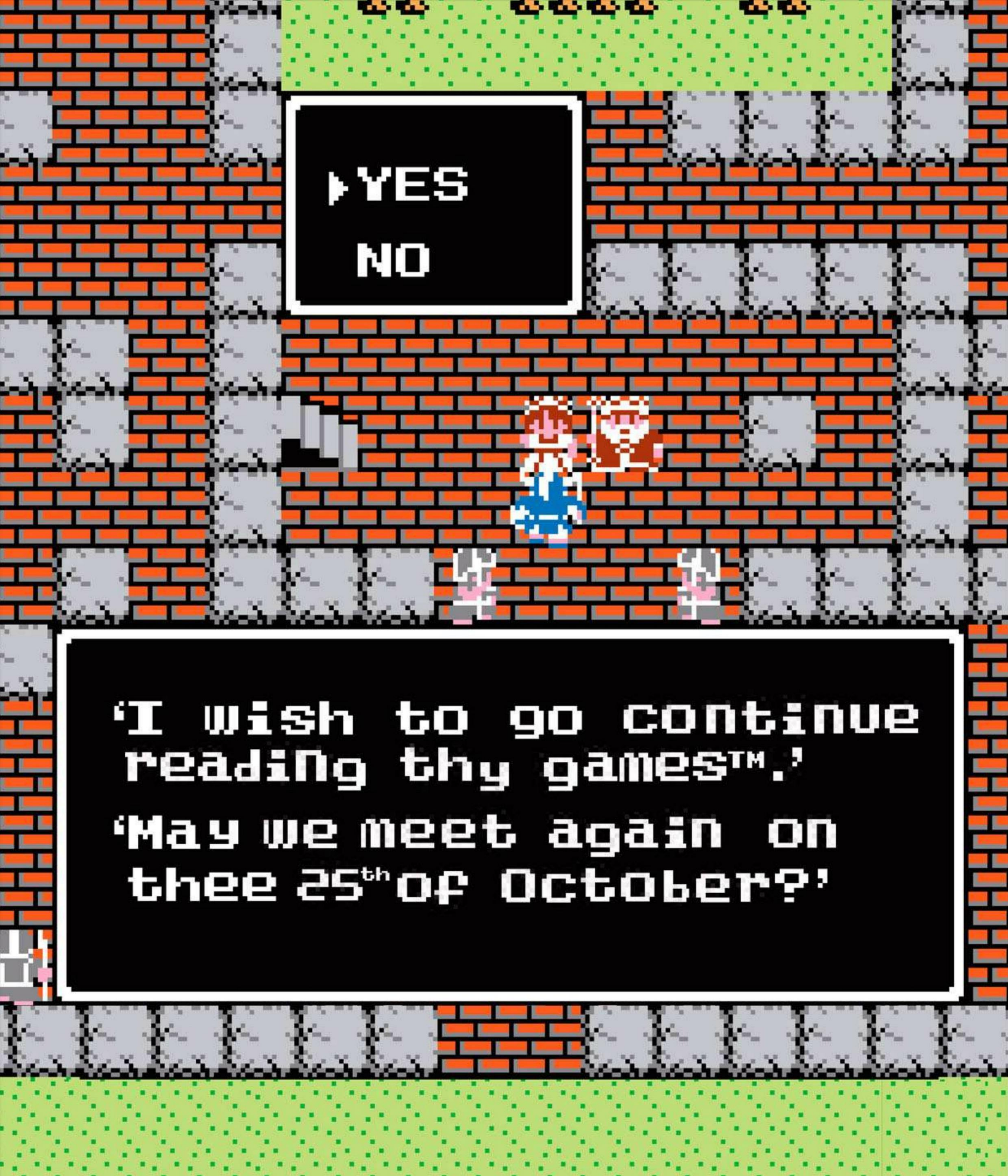
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